Chaoskouji

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Chapter 1 - The Fun Begins

At first, I had wanted a peaceful life, just hoping to experience a normal high school life, but after witnessing the defective idiots on the bus, then also in my class, that idea went out the window. Why bother even trying to have a peaceful life when these morons would just mess it up, even without trying to, and cause me an innumerable number of problems. Even if I kept to myself, based on what sensei is currently saying, it's going to affect me as well.

And if they're going take away my chance for a relationship with peaceful life-chan, then I'm going enjoy playing with the school as much as possible.

Currently, Chabashira-sensei was explaining the school rules, in an obviously scripted manner. It was pathetic at how many people didn't notice the hints, or potentials causes for concern that she left in, even emphasizing certain things like **this** month for points, and the fact that they can be used for anything. Instead of being suspicious about it and because the government was giving not only this luxurious school, but 576 million yen a year as an allowance, most of the class was jumping for joy, planning what they were going to purchase, not even considering the possible repercussions of such a generous allowance.

From what I could see, the only people questioning this were the girl next to me with a superiority complex, Horikita Suzune, and she would never bother to mention it to anyone else, some girl with long brown hair, I think I heard her name was Matsushita when she introduced herself and the narcissist from the bus. He shares a similar appearance with a man named Kouenji, an investor for the white room, so it was likely they were related in some way. Such a privileged upbringing would explain the narcissism. Out of the three, he was probably the most likely to have fun with me, given Horikita's isolationist outlook and Matsushita's apparent attempt to act ordinary, much like I had planned.

To think this was what was considered elite, these were the students being raised as the next leaders of Japan. It was sad. Even the lowest student in the white room at the age of seven was smarter than them. Just being in this environment, despite my hate for my father and dislike of the white room, gave me an appreciation of the reason for its creation.

"If no one has any more questions, I'll leave you all to get acquainted with each other." Sensei was apparently finished with her address, and it seemed like it was left to me to speak up and question the gaps in her conversation.

"Sensei, I have a question. Are my suspicions correct?" Of course, I wasn't going to give everything away, these students didn't deserve to have the answers handed to them alone, but the question was obvious enough to Chabashira, as there was only one suspicion that could be formed from her explanation, and to the narcissist who smirked at my question.

"I'll leave that up to your imagination, but I suspect the answer is yes." With that response and a smirk, she walked out of the classroom, leaving everyone staring at me in bafflement.

"How did she answer your question, you didn't even ask her anything!!??" That was Ike if I remember correctly. One of the class perverts, as he had already been labelled, and he apparently wanted to show off his stupidity to the class.

"Of course, a defect like you wouldn't understand. The question was obvious to a perfect existence like myself, but it seems I am surrounded by pathetic beings, aside from the one exception here." This seemed to anger most of the class, understandably as no one wants to be labelled a defect, and many of the boys, along with some of the girls started yelling back at him, which he promptly ignored by returning to combing his hair.

"Oi, what makes you any better than us!"

"That narcissistic attitude is a real turn off you know!"

"You stupid narcissist, if anyone has a defect it's you!"

At these words I sighed. People were unable to admit to their own flaws, it was a brutal fact but a fallacy most humans were unable to deal with.

"Obviously you are defective, you are in this class. Do you really think people such as yourselves, with your histories would just happen to be placed here together?" This was an important question. It was all still suspicion but in comparison to the other classes, ours had many odd people. How people react to this would give away who actually had an unordinary past, or something to hide. And they would be the easiest to manipulate, the most useful for causing chaos.

And there they are. Three people reacted extremely strongly. The honours student surrounded by girls with blond hair had a look of fear in his eyes. Similarly, one of the girls near him with a long blond ponytail seemed to be having a mild panic attack. However, the most surprising reaction was Kushida's. For someone who had a perfect smile on the entire time, her face had broken, just for a split

second but noticeable, into one of pure anger. If there was something in the past that could turn the classroom angel, who was apparently faking her personality, into a devil, then she could potentially be a powerful pawn to use in the future.

With my early recon done, I stood up from my seat and walked towards the doorway, stopping halfway there near the teacher's podium, before turning around again.

"Are you coming, perfect existence-kun? I feel like making school like a little more interesting, and I believe you'd find it worth your time as a rare piece of entertainment here, away from these noisy defects." Now the disgust in the class turned onto me, but that didn't bother me at all.

"I suppose a perfect existence can entertain you, demon-boy." Now that was interesting. He said this as he got up from his seat with a grin. So, he did know me. I had entertained the possibility, as he was the son of a large investor, but for him to outright state it made things a lot easier for two reasons.

1. It allowed me to not have to be constantly suspicious of his goals and plans, and to relax somewhat around him

2. If that man had allowed him to visit the white room, or at least have any knowledge of me, then he must be extremely talented, and most definitely someone worth my time

"Now that's interesting, you do know me. I had suspected but this makes life much more interesting. I'm sure we can compete at some point for the title of masterpiece. I'm looking forward to someone who can actually challenge me." His body was obviously maximised to the full potential a human can be. He'd also picked up on the hints sensei left, meaning he was extremely observant and to be able to match me in a battle of wits, well that was just icing on the cake.

With that said we both walked towards the door, about to leave 1-D behind for the moment and make life more interesting before -

"Wait."

We turned around at that. Most of the class was still shellshocked at our quick banter and dismantlement of their psyche so quickly, and were sitting silently, but apparently one girl was too stubborn to realise it was also directed at her. Horikita was busy packing up her belongings, apparently intent on coming with us.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"Yes, it's as demon-boy said, why are you acting as if you can accompany two perfect existences?" While this would stump any normal person, someone as broken as Horikita didn't even notice the danger she was walking into.

"You are leaving this room of defects; I'm coming with you. I have

no time to waste with the rest of this class." Now the hostility had returned tenfold and was completely focused on the cold beauty who had added another insult to the class.

"Bwahaha Ice Queen-girl really thinks she can match us, what a foolish situation. It seems she wasn't paying attention to our earlier conversation Ayanokouji-boy."

"Correct as expected Kouenji, she clearly didn't accept being labelled as defective, despite being lumped in with them by your earlier statement. A clear example of a superiority complex." It was a huge gamble saying that name, but if I was correct, and I suspected I was, our position in the class would become one of mystery, instead of one of hatred. Two people who seem so different knowing each other despite starting their conversation with nicknames would lead many people to believe we had some connection beforehand. Simultaneously, this would remove some of the anger towards us, replace it with the mystery and focus it back towards Horikita.

At this double-team response, she seemed stumped for a moment, before once again falling into our trap by latching onto the wrong information. The situation was salvageable, however, due to her superiority she was never in a position to successfully do so.

"Do you two know each other? We haven't even don't introductions and you seem to know each other's names."

"Greatness recognises greatness, Ice Queen-girl"

"Unfortunately, I don't know you, seatmate-chan"

And with that we left the room to their snickering and giggling, finally not being the target of an attack left them relieved and free to regain their imagined social standing by targeting Horikita for us.

Eventually, Kouenji and I found ourselves in a nearby park, with a couple of benches by the water.

"To think I would find the demon himself here. And I thought life at this school would be a boring three years with common garbage."

"I'm impressed there is another human who seems capable of matching me. Not once have I ever come across someone I can acknowledge as a threat, yet something about you makes me wary."

We both faced each other, him grinning, me apathetic, before both exploding into action. Kouenji gave a sharp right jab suddenly, which I blocked, before responding with an elbow to his face. He pulled backwards, just barely dodging it, and spun around with a kick. It was quick and strong, if it hit me, I would suffer serious damage. Grabbing his leg and using it as leverage was out of the question, so I was forced to dodge backwards, giving him more room to come towards me. We traded a few more blows, before both freezing in our current position. His hand, inches from my

stomach, with enough power to make me lose my breakfast, and probably my liver. Mine, inches from his face, specifically his nose, with possibly enough power to knock him unconscious. For a normal human it would be guaranteed, but when it came to this man nothing was certain.

"You do live up to my expectations, demon-boy. To think even after all my years of training there's someone who can match, and possibly defeat me is unexpected, although it makes life that much more interesting." He stepped back from me grinning. "I'll be looking forward to these three years. I expect you to compete with me at your best. It's been far too long since I had some competition."

I sat down onto one of the benches and got my phone out and began typing a message. "Why call me here, demon-boy? If it was a declaration of war, then I'm interested, but you made it sound like I would have fun with you. So? Entertain me." With this demand, I finished writing my message, before passing him my phone so he could read it. In the corner of my eye I could see a platinum haired beauty watching us with a smirk on her face, but she seemed content just analysing us for now, so I let her be.

"Aha, so you realised it too. Of course to be expected from the demon himself, but why post the schools secret for everyone to see?" My message was a full explanation of the S system, as well as I could solve it from sensei's hints. It explained that we would not receive 100,000 yen a month, since it was based on our merit, that there were cameras in the classroom watching our actions, and that the classes would be forced to compete, likely for the privilege of the 100% graduation promise. It also mentioned how the classes were not randomly sorted, based on what I had seen at the welcome ceremony. Class D was full of morons, whilst class A seemed to be comprised of the best students in the grade. Of course, there were holes in my arguments, however, by the school's response to me posting it, and any observations I make around the place, it would be likely to be completely solved in a few days.

"It's essential that our class realises the truth behind the classes. It's likely that their negligence and bad behaviour would cause us to lose all our 'merits' and we would not receive any points next month. I don't particularly care about the graduation reward, and neither do you, it seems, but to live for three years on 100,000 yen seems impossible to me."

"You are correct in that the graduation doesn't bother me. I already have a place as the next leader of the Kouenji conglomerate, but to live on no points does seem horrifying. Ha! You truly are a masterpiece. Stirring up trouble by telling not just

all the classes, but the school too, just so you can live with more luxury. It seems you delivered on your promise of fun!"

What a strange individual. However, he was quite likely the only student in the school who could match me, so I was stuck with him, both as a companion for intelligent conversation, but also as a competitor.

"One last question Kouenji. You know me. Can I take it that you have visited 'that place'?" With my question his look of interest was gone, a scowl replacing it on his face.

"To think a place that dark exists, it makes me furious. I will dismantle it one day, after I rule the Kouenji conglomerate, and pull your father from his throne of shadows. This I swear. TO answer your question, I visited it when I was eight. It was the intensity of that place, and your prowess that inspired me to become the perfect existence I am today, to prove that place a failure. So, in that sense, thank you, although it appears I still may not have completely surpassed you"

"The benefits of a custom education. When that day comes, I will assist you in tearing it down. My father intends for me to take over from him. He is delusional. After killing my only friend, the last remaining person in my generation, there is no way I will let that place exist. For that reason, I ran away here. To learn what the world is truly like. But it seems most people are a disappointment. Hence, my desire for some fun, some chaos."

"I will prove myself to be the perfect existence demon-boy. I will defeat you. But until then, I suppose you are correct in making this school more interesting."

His smirk came back at this, and although my expression remained as it always did, I was excited by this result. Together we would have fun, create chaos in the school for three years, compete to the full extent of our abilities and challenge each other like no other human could. Then when we graduated, that man would fall.

"Why don't we go greet that senpai that's been staring at us for the last ten minutes, before returning to see how the defectives have functioned."

"I would join you but it seems you haven't been paying attention well enough. I suppose that's reasonable due to her being behind you, but her attention has only been on you. A truly unfortunate situation, to think someone with looks as good as hers wouldn't notice my perfect existence." He started walking back to the school, leaving me with one final remark. "I'll leave her to you demon-boy. Maybe she too can bring entertainment to your life."

Authors Notes

This is my first multi-chapter fanfiction. Expect updates twice or

thrice a week, although they wont be long chapters, usually between 2-3k words. I'm also in uni at the moment, and that does take precedent in my life, so i may have to slow down if the work load ever gets too much. I hope you enjoyed so far, please leave some feedback cause I haven't had much experience writing before.

Chapter 2 - Kiryuuin

As I made my way over to the platinum haired girl, she dropped her attention from me for the first time since we arrived and looked at her phone, before laughing out loud. She quickly responded with a message before putting it away and standing up to greet me.

"You are an interesting one, Kouhai-kun~." She stood up, hands on her hips, with a glint in her eye as she addressed me, already giving me a nickname before we were introduced. In short – a very bold senpai.

"I suppose you could say that."

"To figure out the S system on the first day, and not only that but to post it on the school message board, you are bold." She clearly had figured out from the fact that I wasn't in class, had been using my phone just before the message was posted, and had fought a fight with Kouenji with an intensity that I doubted anyone in the school could match that I was the culprit of this action. I saw no reason to deceive her, someone as perceptive as she would be interesting to talk to.

"Yes, I did, although everything I said was a guess based on my teacher's introduction. Would you be willing to confirm how accurate it all was?"

"Aha to think you solved it all just from that scripted speech, I'm more than impressed. As for your question, yes, everything you said was right. Your poor teacher must be frantic right now trying to figure out how you solved it, and the school will probably launch an investigation into you. Don't be surprised if you get called in to meet with them." The entire time she spoke the grin never left her face. She was staring at me as if I was a new meal, something entirely unexpected, fascinating, and unexplored. In response I stared right back, allowing a little of my darkness to seep out through my eyes. Her smile just grew even bigger.

"Incredible kouhai-kun~ there aren't many people who can interest me, only one at all in the senior years, but you, I can't read you at all. I love it." She stuck her hand out to me, a cheeky grin on her face. "Kiryuuin Fuuka. I'm expecting great things from you kouhai." I grasped her hand, and she increased her grip way beyond a normal handshake. I responded just the same, increasing my grip until I saw a wince.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. It's a pleasure to meet someone else interesting in this place. Most of the people I've met so far are rather slow."

"I'll be watching you Kiyotaka-kun. Show Fuuka-chan something fun, make my life interesting."

"Oh, I intend to, Kiryuuin-senpai. This school is rather boring, I'm looking for some chaos." This response got another laugh out of her. Meanwhile her phone buzzed for possibly the thirtieth time in the last few minutes.

"I seem to have made an error. I'm known for not taking an interest in anything, so when the message was posted a senpai and an idiot asked me if I had stirred up trouble with a kouhai. Unfortunately, I was foolish enough to mention I knew who had done it, and now the entire second and third year are attempting to contact me. Very interesting, since only a few people should have my number. Someone is going to suffer a punishment from Fuuka-chan for this." A sadistic grin plastered her face as she said this. Obviously, she only had a few friends based on her attitude, and one of them would no longer be in her trusted circle. More likely it was that idiot she mentioned earlier, who clearly wanted to piss her off, but it seemed they had gone too far and didn't understand the consequences she would deal out to them.

"I suppose I had better go meet with my evil messengers kouhai-kun. And it seems you have an appointment as well!" As she spoke an announcement played over the loudspeakers, asking for 'Ayanokouji to come to the staff room'. "Enjoy dealing with the teachers kouhai, I'm off to deal with the Student Council President and Mr Notice Me Senpai."

She started to walk off but stopped suddenly and came back. "Here kouhai-kun. You interest me, so you have earned my phone number. Don't forget about old Fuuka-chan, alright, come visit me and make life more interesting often." And with that she walked back towards the school, platinum hair swaying in the wind.

What an interesting person. She would definitely be a helpful tool to have in making this school more fun.

And who is 'Mr Notice Me Senpai'?

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two. Wouldn't that be entertaining to see.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't even notice how far I had walked until I had reached the student council room. Not bothering to knock on the door I waltzed on in and plopped myself down on one of the couches there.

"There you are Kiryuuin, I was wondering how long it would take for you to get here." Horikita Manabu, the student council president, didn't seem too bothered with my actions, knowing that if I cared about a student enough to respond to his message, my info would be interesting enough to allow some poor action to go by unnoticed.

Tachibana-senpai disagreed it seems.

"Please show some proper respect, Kiryuuin-san. He is the student council president and deserves your respect." Of course, she knew that I already respected him, as I had made it clear that he was an interesting existence, and therefore was only lecturing me out of responsibility. And probably partially from her affection for the man.

Nagumo was much less reasonable.

"Kiyruuin-san, you are a disgrace to our grade. Show proper respect. You are in the presence of the student council president, the best student in the school, and me, the vice president. It's clear why you belong in 2-B. Your actions are not those of someone who belongs in the best class."

"As per usual you fail to understand my motivation and attempt to insult me with meaningless arguments, Mr Notice Me. Please grow a brain." Horikita-senpai chuckled at this, knowing I had no interest in reaching Class A. Why he appointed Nagumo to Vice President I still don't understand.

Nagumo fumed at my response but kept quiet at a gesture from Horikita. Both were eager to hear what I thought of kouhai-kun, but it seemed Nagumo, even in the face of impending excitement still couldn't resist trying to needle people. Pathetic.

"I received your five thousand messages, thank you for filling up my phone and draining my battery. Also, Nagumo, we're going to have a chat later about who you give my number to. I distinctly remember the five people who have it, and it seems more than that number have contacted me in the last 30 minutes. 7 times that to be exact." I gave him a threatening smile with this, and his face paled somewhat. Obviously, it was him who gave it out. He was the only untrustworthy person who had it, and he only had it out of convenience for me. It seems that convenience had not worth been it.

"Calm down Kiryuuin-san. You said you met the student who

posted it, and Ayanokouji Kiyotaka he signed it. I heard him being called to the staff room, but why were you in contact with him. Did you provide him with the information?" Ah, so I was being interrogated. Always a fun situation, especially with a clever student like Horikita-senpai.

"I told him nothing but confirmed his suspicions after he posted it. There's nothing wrong with that is there? As for how I know him, he left class right after his teacher's scripture reading, discovered the flaws in the holy words of God, and was bored enough to tell his whole grade." That should rattle them. Neither of them had figured out the system that fast, or at least enough to confidently tell the class before the 1st of May. Nagumo must be seething to find someone younger than him that was so much smarter.

"Bored? He said he was bored? Well, it seems like he will be a very interesting student. Thank you for that Kiryuuin. I was surprised when you claimed to know him, but considering how intelligent he is, I'm no longer shocked you took an interest in him at all, let alone spoke to him. You may go now." They think I'm going to leave? Foolish. Kouhai will come here, and I'd like to be here when he does. Whatever happens will be amazing to watch.

"Pfft I'm not leaving. I've already messaged him, asking him to come here when he's done with the teachers. After going to such lengths as giving him my number and texting him do you think I'm just going to leave and miss the fireworks. Please. This is much too exciting to miss."

"I always knew you disrespected any authority Kiryuuin, but this is too far. Leave now or there will be punishment!" Oops. I seem to have broken Nagumo. His face was red with rage, and he'd jumped up from his seat to yell at me. Tachibana-sensei seemed torn between with agreeing with him and trying not to laugh at his stupidity.

Horikita-sensei didn't try to hide it however, he outright laughed at Nagumo and told him to sit down.

"Since you went to the trouble to invite him here, I suppose you can stay Kiryuuin. After all, you did do all the work." Hehe, I get to see kouhai-again. And I get to see him embarrass Nagumo. Oh, this will be spectacular.

"In the meantime, why don't you look at this, Kiryuuin. His entrance exams. Normally I wouldn't show anyone these, not even the rest of the student council," he glared at Nagumo as he said this, "but you might find them to be interesting." He passed me the exam, and as I flipped through it my grin got wider and wider, until I was laughing out loud reading the last page. Oh kouhai-kun this is too much. You really are excellent.

I knew you would be interesting.

Authors Notes

A bit of a shorter chapter, but I was pretty happy with how it turned out. A warning, the next few chapters may be a little dull, as I still have to set the scene, and this arc has to get everyone into place. Boring, but it must be done. As I've been writing the chapters have been getting longer naturally, so yay, not crushed by disappointing word length as much anymore

A few people were mentioning that Ayanokouji didn't harbour any bad feelings for the White Room in the novels. To be honest I've read so much fanfiction that i can't remember whats cannon and whats not. For each relavent section I'm going to be reading the novel, but yeah, kinda forgot all about that. Might speed read a few just to recap.

Chapter 3 - Dealing with Authority

As I walked towards the staff room numerous scenarios played through my mind. Considering who I would be speaking with, and how much trouble I was in for spreading my theories. Due to the quick response, and how the school was likely to react, it probably wasn't anything serious. More likely Chabashira was panicking, trying to figure out how I had solved the schools secret so quickly, whether I had help, and if she herself was in trouble.

Obviously, since the teachers had been given a script specially worded to give these hints, it was clear that the school expected students to partially figure out the S-System however, I found it unlikely that anyone had ever solved it to the extent I had, let alone on the first day. In consideration of this, it was completely reasonable that the administration would blame Chabashira herself for leaking the information to me. And due to the nature of the school inviting students to discover this themselves, any action taken by teachers to interfere would likely be frowned upon.

Whilst considering these thoughts, I had made it all the way to the staff room. Thanks to the honestly ludicrous amount of spending that went into this school, there was plenty of accurate signage around, making locating the room rather easy.

Reaching it, I knocked on the door, and upon receiving a quiet "come in" I opened it and entered the room.

Waiting inside, not far from the door was Chabashira-sensei. Standing up from the wall, she motioned for me to follow her and walked through the main room, which seemed more like a common room than anything, and entered through a door on the side wall. Following her in, I found myself in a private office, presumably hers.

It was a rather empty room, with not many belongings in it, cold and empty much like the teacher who owned it.

"Take a seat." Gesturing at one of the chairs in front of her desk, she sat in the leather one behind it. Neither of us spoke for a minute, both waiting for the other to be the first. Eventually, though she cracked and broke the silence first. "How did you figure it out?"

"The system? It was rather easy. You gave us quite a few hints in your obviously scripted introduction, and I made my post vague

enough that anyone knowledgeable in the situation could fill in the blanks, and eventually confirm whether my suspicions are correct. So, thank you." This response seemed to upset her greatly, her expression souring at falling into my trap, although Kiryuuin had already confirmed everything, so I gained nothing from her response.

"No student has ever figured out the system to that extent before, let alone on the first day, so clearly it wasn't as easy as you said." Saying this, she reached into a draw on her desk and pulled out some papers. "Based on your entrance exam, it seemed you just wanted to be left alone to live a quiet life. Yet you made a scene in front of the class, befriended the narcissist, and not only exposed the system to your fellow classmates but the entire grade. Knowing it's a competition, I can't see the benefit in you doing so?"

"True, I was going to live a quiet life." I explained my reasoning as I looked over the exams. 50 in every subject working from the hardest to easiest, just as intended. "But that was before I saw the level on my classmates. Living a quiet life with them would be excruciatingly painful, let alone boring. So, I decided to have some fun instead." I handed back the exams. I remembered every question still, there was no real benefit to looking at them, besides to prove sensei's point.

"The school has me under investigation, claiming I may have informed you about the S-System. Of course, when they look at the cameras it will be obvious I didn't, but you've caused problems, for everyone in the school."

"You're welcome for making life interesting, sensei. I'm sure you can understand my desire to not deal with such defective students." At my last remark, she finally cracked a smile. It seems I had read her, and the class, correctly.

"I suppose you are correct there. Very well, Ayanokouji, you may go. Do try to stay out of trouble, won't you?" I stood up from the desk and walked back to the door, stopping as I opened it, and turning back to face her.

"I suppose I can try sensei. But where's the fun in that?"

After leaving the staff room, I noticed I had a message on my phone. Kiryuuin had asked me to come to the student council room as soon as possible. This wasn't unexpected either, as I'm sure they would love to investigate an interesting student like myself, evident from the number of texts she had received, and it should be much more interesting than my previous conversation, not to mention a lot more fun.

The surprising thing was that she had messaged me herself. From what I had gotten out of Chabashira, she didn't seem the student to

do something like that herself. Possibly the student council president had asked her to, but he ordinarily would have made an announcement over the loudspeaker, the same as sensei.

No, from what I knew, Kiryuuin probably messaged me without asking, pre-empting that they would want to see me. Even if they didn't, she may have invited me anyway, just to bring together interesting people and cause some chaos.

Who am I to turn down such an opportunity?

The student council room was located on the third floor of the school, along with all the third year classrooms. A prestigious spot, with windows that overlook most of the school grounds, although it was impossible to see everything on a 660,000 square meter campus. As I knocked on the door, it was opened rather quickly, as if they had been waiting there for me. Well, I suppose they had been. The door was answered by a shortish girl with purple hair tied in two buns.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, correct? Please come in, the President and Vice President are waiting for you." A very formal greeting, more formal than even sensei had given, yet behind it there was a sense of curiosity, and possibly a hint of fear. I suppose that was warranted, meeting a new student who seemed to understand the school faster than anyone else.

"Thank you. It's an honour to be invited to meet such important people." A small smile formed on her face, hidden in it a smirk of superiority. Clearly, she valued the student council very highly, most likely since she was a member. Since she specifically mentioned the President and Vice President, the most likely title for her was secretary, as the other role of treasurer wouldn't be one to open the door to an invited guest.

She opened the door fully and stood to the side, allowing me to walk in. There were three other people waiting inside, all looking at me with keen interest, intelligent gazes boring into me, analysing me at a personal level. Or trying to, at least. I had not yet come across someone who could read me, even the last remaining students of my generation before they too inevitably failed.

In a large chair behind a central desk at the end of the room sat who I presumed to be the student council president. A well-built young man, with short dark hair, and glasses covering his eyes, with a stare that could come close to 'that man'. A stern, serious look covered his face as he took the situation in with the dignity and composure expected of someone in such an esteemed position.

On the couch next to the desk sat a blond. Unlike the president, he had a smile on his face, and seemed to be taking the situation as something incredibly fun, an exciting development in the dull life of

the Vice President. He wasn't as well built as the President, but still had an appearance and aura of power, similar to the President but less of a respectful existence, and in a more dangerous, underhanded sense.

The last student I had already met, being the girl who had called me here. Kiryuuin Fuuka had somehow managed to worm her way into this meeting, despite not being on the student council. While she hadn't directly confirmed this, her disregard for boring and time-consuming things, along with her disinterest at interacting with boring people was essentially a guarantee that she wouldn't be a member.

"Welcome, Ayanokouji. Please, take a seat." Gesturing towards the other couch, opposite from the Vice President and Kiryuuin, the President gave his greeting. "My name is Horikita Manabu, Student Council President. With me here is second year Vice President Nagumo Miyabi, the Vice President, third year Secretary Tachibana Akane, and I believe you have already met Kiryuuin Fuuka." My suspicions on each of their roles had been correct.

I sat down on the luxurious couch. It seemed the student council had quite a large budget, or at least had spent a large amount on this room. Tachibana then proceeded to close the door and moved to stand behind the President, either very dedicated to her role as secretary, or to him. It wasn't clear, but their relationship was something worth figuring out.

"What can I do for you, Horikita-senpai. It's my first day here and I would like the chance to explore the school a bit this afternoon." It really was a large school. This wasn't even an excuse, I did want to explore and get my bearings, to figure out the weaknesses in the school, particularly the security cameras and how to exploit them.

"Don't worry, we won't keep you for long. I simply wanted to meet the most interesting student to ever come through this school." Ah. So just like with Chabashira it was an interrogation. Not unexpected, but annoying. The less they know about me the better. "To figure out the system on the first day is exceptional. Not only that, but if you understand how it works, posting it for all the classes to read goes against the concept of the class battles in the future, something else I see you predicted."

"What's so interesting about this? Would it not be considered kind to help out my fellow students in not losing their income?" Playing it off as simple kindness due to a lack of info was an impossible task to accomplish, but significantly it would make him more likely to divulge any information I had not yet gleamed. Obviously acting foolish as a pretext to hide what I know, when really, I don't know much more at all. This conversation had the potential to prove

incredibly valuable.

"Don't bother with this charade. I know you know everything, Kiryuuin informed me that she confirmed your statements earlier. Normally that sort of thing would be forbidden but this situation is unprecedented. Even I didn't make as many connections as you did on the first day, or even during the first month."

"Neither did I. Perhaps you too, can entertain me." Now Nagumo's grin had shifted into something more predatory, as if I was a new toy for him to destroy. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't someone he was capable of defeating. At least if he did try, it would make life more interesting. To fight against someone in a position of power, now that is a fun challenge.

"Nagumo. Leave him alone for now. You'll have plenty of chances later in the year to see his potential, but you know first years are rather isolated in most of their competitions." So, there would be inter-year challenges. Good to know. Turning back to me after that little interruption, he continued "can I take it that you were bored then? I understand completely, someone with your potential placed in class D would of course chafe against their classmates, but to ignore the purpose of the school completely, it seems you simply wanted to cause trouble." He saw right through me instantly, not taking any opportunities to give me extra information. Horikita Manabu was a formidable student, and someone I would be quite interested in facing. Time to shift the conversation.

"You seem much more capable than your sister. Or at least you aren't hampered with a crippling defect like her."

"So, she really did follow me after all." Thank you for confirming my theory, Manabu. "It seems she hasn't changed in the last two years. Very well then, Ayanokouji, you may go. It was a pleasure to meet you. I'm expecting great things from you over the next few years. Please don't disappoint me."

With that said I got up from my chair. "This conversation has been extremely useful. I appreciate you taking time for me. And don't expect too much. I will simply do what I want to make life fun. Whether that is to your liking or not I don't particularly care." Finally, Manabu showed a smile.

"Enjoy your time here Ayanokouji. And feel free to teach my sister a lesson. Someone needs to." What a cruel brother, although from what I had seen of Horikita so far it was not a simple thing to do. Clearly he'd been trying to break her out of her shell for a long time, but so far was unsuccessful, and hence outsourcing the task to me. Nodding once in response I left the room. Stopping just outside the door I waited for a moment, trying to hear their next conversation, although it turned out to not be of any use.

"He really didn't change his face at all did he? Kinda creepy if you ask me, Horikita-san." That was Tachibana.

"It's impressive. His self-control along with his quick intellect, he is a student I can respect." Manabu.

"Oh, is that the case? Then I will definitely have fun battling him." Nagumo.

I share the sentiment, Nagumo. You are far more interesting than anyone else in my class, and possibly my grade. Please make our battle interesting. Otherwise, everything will be much too boring for my liking.

Authors Notes

I spent quite a while fiddling with this chapter, but I'm still not overly happy with it. No idea what it needs to fix it, just a sense of dissapointment when reading back over it. Oh well such is life.

Chapter 4 - An Eventful Afternoon

Now that my business with the Student Council was over, I finally had a chance to explore the school. My freedom was finally achieved. Even though this was still a prison of sorts, there was far more freedom, and I could make decisions for myself here.

Three years. I had three years to learn what it was like to live in society, how to interact with ordinary people, how to be human.

Unfortunately, while I had met some very interesting people such as Kiryuuin, Manabu and Nagumo, the people I had intended to interact with and learn from were my classmates.

My dull, stupid, shallow classmates. And I had blown that opportunity completely this morning. It was extremely unlikely that they would move on and forgive me for my attitude this morning, so some form of intervention would likely be necessary. Perhaps a sob story. From my readings in literature, a sad story to guise an apology was an effective method of garnering sympathy, especially with girls. Something to contemplate before class tomorrow.

For now, though, I needed to eat something. It was mid-afternoon, and I hadn't eaten food since breakfast. While I am capable of going days without food thanks to my training, it was not an ideal situation to be in.

As I approached the first-year dorms, I saw there was a small store nearby. It appeared to sell many necessities needed for a simple life, and most notably, ingredients and cooking utensils. Over the past year, Matuso had gone to great lengths to ensure I was capable of cooking high quality and nutritious meals, even with limited ingredients.

In order to save points, it was essential to cook meals. Even though I had warned my classmates, they most likely would not listen due to a stubborn refusal to accept me as someone better than them, and hence the number of points we received next month would certainly be much less. Cooking food was almost always cheaper, for both lunches and dinner. Obtaining a bento box should also be possible in this store, as that would allow me to save on lunches as well as eat where I want to.

This school was rather large, however, and so I should not make a static judgement so quickly. It was possible that on the far corner of campus or hidden in an alleyway there was a small store with

cheap food that could rival my cooking. Of course, this was unlikely, but I could not rule it out until I had explored the entirety of campus.

Unfortunately for me, as I entered, I saw one of my classmates who was certain to detest me.

Standing in the isle of ingredients, which I was heading to was Horikita, my seatmate, and the girl that Kouenji and I had humiliated the most out of the class. Although she hadn't done much not only was she shot down by our double-pronged attack, but she also inadvertently insulted the rest of the class earning their ire as well.

As she stood there comparing two different products, I walked up to her and attempted to start a conversation. Despite her incredible hindering superiority complex, she was an intelligent person, and based on small observations she was rather fit too, probably above average when it came to athletics. Her nature was based in reason, however she simply did not consider the possibility of anyone being better than her. Also, her disregard for those below her, ironically, made her unable to act as someone superior, in the sense of a leader, since no one would ever follow someone with an attitude such as hers. Based on what I had observed in the class, she was one of the most observant students, and if she abandoned her superiority complex, she would make a great leader. Perhaps then the class could become a little more interesting.

Until she did that, I would needle at her and slowly chip away at this facet of her personality and make her into someone worth my time. A return on my investment, I suppose. If she was anything like her brother, then her potential would most certainly be worth developing, if only to see what chaos she could bring to the other three classes.

"Trying to save some points?" She was obviously doing so, comparing the same item but for different prices, trying to justify whether it was worth spending more.

"This has to be a joke. What could you possibly want to speak with me about? Here to brag your genius again?" The fact that she even spoke to me was a surprise. I was expecting to be ignored and walked away from, but this made things much easy.

"Obviously you have some suspicious about the points. I saw you react when sensei was explaining it."

"Of course. 100,000 is a ridiculous amount per month for high school students. Also..." She hesitated here, probably not wanting to admit something. "I read your post. It was well written and covered every argument. As much as I dislike your attitude, I can't refute what you said. Even though it's still a hypothesis, I would rather be

cautious."

"So, you admit my superiority then?" Her gaze became sharp, and I could tell she was doing everything she could to resist hitting me. Calm down, you're nothing. "Clearly your though process is much more refined than the rest of the defectives in the class." At the mention of the word defective, Horikita seemed to give up controlling her impulses. Her left hand came up to try and slap me, rather quickly too, clearly, she had some training. I grabbed her wrist just before it reached me and applied a small amount of pressure. Once I saw her face contort slightly from pain, I released her. "Although it's not a theory, I spoke with Manabu earlier, and he confirmed everything I said." Oops. That was a mistake. Her face went red, a vein popping out and her grip was so tight on her shopping basket her entire hand had gone white.

"Nii-san. Spoke to you. Why. How. And. You call him Manabu? Disgraceful. Show some respect." Noted. Don't mention the brother to the bro-con.

"He asked me to call him that." A lie, but he probably wouldn't mind. "And as for meeting him, he simply wanted to talk to the 'the most interesting student to ever come through this school'. His words not mine." This seemed to finally break her. Torn between her respect for her brother, her hatred of me for humiliating her in class, but having to respect me as a person both recognised by Manabu and someone she considered to be as perceptive as her (not capable of admitting I was more so) had finally collided and broken her ability to rationalise the situation at all.

Either way that conversation had been progress. It seems she didn't hate me as much as I expected, her superiority forcing her to recognise greatness as good. "Well, enjoy your shopping, and try to save some points." I grabbed the last items I needed from that isle and walked to the register.

There seemed to be some sort of a commotion occurring at the front of the line. A big red-haired boy was yelling at the cashier, something about forgetting his card. Idiot. We explicitly got told our id card pays for everything, yet he put it down somewhere and left without it. Oh, he was one of the students in my class, wasn't he? I didn't catch his name, but based on his physique, he was someone who had extensively trained, not even close to the level that I had, but he was incredibly fit and strong, far higher than the average high school student. He could be useful to have as a tool, so getting on his good side was essential.

"Look, just hold my stuff for a sec! I'll run back and grab it!" Sigh. This was annoying. I could see the line of customers behind him were frustrated, some of them even calling out, telling him to hurry

up or get lost. However, this provided a unique opportunity to get on his good side.

"Hey, let me pay for you." I walked to the front of the line and offered to pay for him. Obviously, he would be suspicious of this, but it wasn't like he had many options.

"Wait, you're that rude kid from earlier! What do you want, come to talk down on me again?" So, he had anger issues. They would need to be resolved quickly before they caused him to get in my way. Although leaving him to rampage for the next three years would be quite entertaining, being able to direct that rampage would be a much more valuable use for this moron.

"You're causing a ruckus. I just want to deal with this now, so let me pay and you can go back and find your card." Saying this I placed my card on the scanner, and waited for a beep before walking off, having payed for his cup noodles, and lined up at the back. A few customers gave me grateful looks, and the cashier started to serve the next person. The red-haired boy, looked at me, probably torn between wanting to thank me and still being mad at my attitude in class, before going outside to sit at a table and eat his noodles.

After paying for my items, I left the store, and saw three older boys about to approach the table the red-haired boy was sitting at. This could prove interesting. A show of dominance, perhaps? Or an extortion, trying to scam a clueless first year? I took out my phone and started recording, watching from around a pole. It never hurt to be cautious.

Ah, so that was their plan. Rile him up, since he clearly looked like a delinquent with a hot head, and get it caught on camera. Each of the three boys had taken a second to glance at it, but somehow the red-haired boy hadn't noticed. People really were slow here, not seeing such a long glance.

Oh well, time to interfere and get some points. Walking over, I put a hand on the red-haired boy's shoulder, holding him back slightly.

"Calm down. It's obvious that they want you to fight them, or they wouldn't be trying to antagonise you so much. There's clearly cameras here, their plan was to catch you on video and extort points from you." Both my surprise appearance and comprehensive understanding of their plan shocked both the upperclassmen and my classmate, stopping them all in their tracks. Previously, the red-haired boy, I really need to learn his name, was about to get violent with me, but after hearing my explanation calmed down a little.

Or not, because he immediately turned his rage back at the upperclassmen.

"Hey, you! Trying to steal my points! You really think you can get away with that!" Oh god, he actually was stupid. It would take a long time to be able to fix his anger issue. Perhaps I could manipulate him to focus on another person, either through competition or attraction. While I may not feel romance, affection or hate myself, the concepts were rather simple, and I had read enough books on psychology that I could use and manipulate these feelings simply enough. Something to consider later.

"Tch. He figured out our plan. Let's go, no point sticking around with Class D defectives any longer." Luckily red-hair boy just stared at their retreating figures, making my job much easier.

"Wait." They stopped and turned around, about to badmouth me, but froze when they heard the recording I had taken. "This is you admitting to attempting to extortion. As I recall, sensei mentioned that the school takes these incidents very seriously. So, the question is, what are you willing to do to get me to delete this." It would be much more useful to hold the recording over their heads. Pawns in upper years would be essential, however, this video was flimsy at best, and currently securing private points was my number one priority. I'm sure these foolish upperclassmen would also try something later, and then I could properly trap them.

"What do you want, points? I know it sucks being new year, so many things and not enough points to try them all." Hit the nail on the head. Although, this upperclassman really was dumb. If they still assumed that the first years had no knowledge of the system, they would believe we believed that we got 100,000 each month, meaning that to us, points would be considered a lesser commodity. But I know that it's not true, so they are incorrect to believe that I believe that, making their entire attempt to bribe me usually stupid. Although, since I had solved the system, they lucked out and points did become something valuable to first years. A broken clock is right twice a day.

Confusing right? Gonna be honest I confused myself writing this.

"How many points do you each have." Upperclassmen should have decent amounts of savings available. After looking over them, I gave my demand. "80%. Give me 80% of all your points and I will delete the video." Looking frustrated at being outclassed by a new student, they transferred them over to me. 1.2 million each. A decent amount to work with, this would be useful in the future. Once they were transferred over, I showed them my phone, and deleted the video, then left them to walk off in silence.

"Yeah, run away you bastards! If I see you again, I'll show you not to mess with me!" He really didn't learn anything did he. I could almost guarantee that he would fall into the same trap sooner or

later if I didn't do anything now.

"Oi. Moron." That got his attention. He turned to face me, fists clenched, as if he was going to strike me.

"Insulting me again? Yeah, you've helped me out a bit, but don't think I'm gonna let that go!"

"This whole situation is your fault. Either control your temper, or someone will be successful and scam your points." This was the boiling point for him. Stepping forward, he threw a fist at my face. It was quick, and quite powerful, he definitely had the strength to back up his attitude. Which just meant I had to crush him even easier.

Dodging his fist, I moved forward and threw a sharp jab into his stomach. I didn't put much power into it, but it was enough to drop him to the ground, winded and gasping in pain.

"You may have been the strongest one around before, but here and now, there are plenty of people stronger, and smarter. Use your brain, think. Because next time, I won't help you." That should get through to him. Displaying ones strength was a simple way to garner respect, especially from those that based their self-worth on their strength.

"Tch. Fine. I get it. You really can back up what you said in class today." Huh. He acquiesced to the situation much faster than I thought. "It's not easy for me to control my temper, I know it's a problem, but I can't do much about it." Even though he thought he couldn't change, recognising his problem was a huge difference from even five minutes ago.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait!" Good, he fell for my trap. By reaching the point in conversation for introductions then leaving, he was societally obliged to reach out a hand, making in his mind me his friend. "My name is Sudou Ken. What's yours. After you're insults in class, you left without introducing yourself." I turned back around to face him, and upon seeing him hold out his hand I grasped it firmly.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. It's a pleasure." Saying this I finally left with my groceries and found my dorm room.

So, this was freedom. Well, it wasn't nearly as boring as I thought. I will have to make my own fun, train and raise those around me so they can actually pose a challenge, but either way, this school could use a little chaos. I will run amuck through my grade and defeat anyone who gets in my way.

Yes, that would be the interesting life I was searching for.

Authors Notes

So i was pretty happy with this chapter. The characters may be a bit OOC or rushed development, but it was a bit longer than the

previous chapters so yay. Bit of setup, next chapter is also dull but things get more interesting in chapter 6. Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 5 - Class Familiarity

Entering the classroom the next day was like walking into a viper pit. I had chosen to come just on time, arriving minutes before classes were supposed to start to avoid dealing with unnecessary trouble, but it seems that was inevitable. Horikita was pointedly ignoring me, still upset after our interaction at the store. Sudou was torn, because as much as he was insulted by my actions yesterday, I had still assisted him in avoiding trouble with the seniors, and he couldn't completely ignore the possibility that I wasn't as harsh as my first impression gave off, along with being forced to recognise my strength. The rest of the class, however, was glaring at me. Obviously, they hadn't forgiven my actions and words yesterday, acting superior and calling them defects had struck a serious blow to their egos.

It wasn't wrong though.

Eventually they would realise, whether it be now, or next month when we inevitably receive a lot less points, if any, that I was correct. When that happened, well, it would be wonderful chaos, a crushing blow to their self-worth. But until then, or until their hatred wears off, I would have to suffer their distain.

One possible solution would be to keep my head down. Yesterday I had made a big impression, one which couldn't easily be changed, but if I kept to myself eventually, they would forget me, and come test time I would, along with Kouenji, prove our superiority to all of them.

Before I could continue my train of thought any longer, I was approached by one of my classmates, the one who had been surrounded by girls. Fit, average height and blond hair. I believe his name was –

"Hirata Yousuke. It's good to finally make your acquaintance, Ayanokouji-kun was it?" He extended his hand towards me, which I grasped and shook. He had a firm grip, and so I responded in kind, matching it exactly. This was the easiest way to hide strength, make it indistinguishable from your opponent and no one could tell the difference.

"Likewise. Since I left early yesterday, I've only had the opportunity to talk to a few people so far, so it's nice to meet

another classmate properly." Surrounding us I could hear murmurs, questioning why Hirata would talk to a "stuck up narcissist like him", and wondering why I was acting so differently today. That should be obvious. Hirata was clearly a central figure to much of the class, so his favour would revert some of the damage I had done to my image in their eyes.

"I was wondering if you could explain what you posted yesterday. I read it over with a couple of other members of the class, but even then, we couldn't quite understand what it was saying."

"It meant exactly what it said. There's no point elaborating further on it, since if you didn't understand my post there really isn't a less complex method of explaining the situation. If you still don't understand," I gestured to the person walking through the door, "you could ask sensei, although she obviously can't confirm any of the details." Hirata took notice of what I was saying and nodded. It seemed he was one of the smarter students in Class D. After quickly scribbling on a sheet of paper and placing it on my desk, he returned to his seat and waited for class to begin.

To my disappointment, no one asked Chiyabashira any questions about my claims, and even more so, most of the class wasn't paying attention. Clearly, they didn't take my post seriously or hadn't bothered to read it. Unfortunate, but it's not my place to help them any further. I'd given them everything they needed, but if they refused it then there was no point bothering any further.

Looking at the piece of paper on my desk, it had a name and a phone number. Huh. Maybe he really did want to make friends with me. In any case this would be a useful asset to have.

The moment class ended, I got up from my seat, only to be greeted by several boys in the class standing in front of me. From the constant chatter in class, I had picked up the rest of the names of my classmates that I hadn't learned yesterday (do they not understand how to act in a classroom), especially the boys standing in front of me.

"Oi bastard. You've got a lot of nerve showing your face today!"

"Yeah! A guy like you could never be better than us!"

"To think you would insult us all on the first day, even an angel like Kushida-chan, how mean are you?!"

Their names were Ike, Miyamoto and Yamauchi, respectively. Sudou was also standing alongside them, although he wasn't saying anything, probably dragged along to look tough.

The rest of the class, bar Horikita and Kouenji, both of whom had already left, grew quiet watching our interaction.

"Do you expect me to not come to class?" Whilst they had the right to be upset, their arguments were rather flawed. Did they

think I wouldn't show up out of shame, or was scared of anyone here from the repercussions? Rather foolish, although I suppose defective students couldn't reason any further than that.

"Maybe we should keep you from our class! Did ya think of that? Come on Sudou, let's get him!" They posed themselves in the most ridiculous fighting stances, probably taken straight out of some movie they watched. Luckily Sudou himself was hesitant and didn't move, probably considering this a bad idea. Good Sudou. Learn to think.

"If you try and fight me you just prove my point. Clearly you didn't read what I posted yesterday, because if you did you would know about the hidden cameras in the room." I sighed at this. "Please use your brains, there is no reason for me to have to beat you up."

"You just insulted us again didn't you!" Actually, it was twice Miyamoto, but I guess that's too hard for you to notice. "Who cares about shitty cameras!" Saying this he ran at me. Slowly. This was just sad. Should I let him hit me or stop him. Both options had their pros and cons, however hitting him would only serve to further anger the others. Stopping him would also reveal my strength, which I didn't want to do. So, then I decided.

"Yaaaauugghhh!" I stepped to the side just before he reached me, and he ran right past, straight into the wall, and then collapsed on the floor. This was apparently far enough for the rest of the class, as a few of them stood up and started scolding us for fighting. This continued for a couple of seconds before the false angel herself stood up.

"Please, everyone, don't fight. It's only the second day, we should be trying to get along not fighting." It seems most of my classmates took her word as gospel. That fake smile of hers was truly very effective. I had yet to figure her out, but I could tell she would be much more interesting than most of the other defectives here. "Ayanokouji-kun, what you said yesterday before leaving was very hurtful however, I would like to move past it. You are a classmate and it's important for everyone to get along."

"Kushida, wasn't it?" At her nod I continued. "I won't apologise for what I said yesterday. I said what I meant, and that's just how I am." The angry glares started to return at this, and some people opened their mouths to retort but I continued before they could. "All my life I've been home-schooled. I've never had a chance to meet many, or any, people my age, and I don't know how to interact properly. I will try my best to be a more considerate classmate from now on, so please, I'd like to move on from that, and try to be a bit more thoughtful." A few sad smiles went across the

room, and most of the people angry at me before had calmed down at my story. That should throw them. Most of the girls, and even some of the boys it seemed, had bought my semi-apology. Thanks to Hirata's conversation with me, and Kushida giving me the chance to control the conversation, I had manipulated it in a direction where most humans would be instinctively forced to feel sympathetic to me. Even if they still were mad, their mind had no choice but to forgive me. It seems the only ones who weren't convinced were the shallowest of girls, all of whom seemed to flock to Hirata, and the three boys who confronted me earlier, their eyes still saying, 'we hate you'. Apparently, my confrontation with them wasn't over yet, but that was a problem I could easily deal with. The only other person who didn't buy it was, surprisingly, Kushida herself. Her smile was all forgiving, yet her eyes were full of mirth. She was smirking on the inside, I felt, scoffing at both the bullshit I spewed, and the fact that most of the class bought it.

I would have to change my earlier assumption of her: she was not potentially useful, but essential to have on your side. Her control of the class was undisputed, and her ability to act was undeniably impressive. Eventually, she would slip up, make a mistake, and I would be there to catch it, and make her mine. With the trust people placed in her already, in a few months her ability to cause chaos would be virtually unstoppable.

"If that's all, then I'll be going now." As I walked to the door Kushida called out to me again.

"Wait. Ayanokouji-kun can we exchange phone numbers. You missed it yesterday, but I'd like to be friends with everyone in the grade, so if you could please."

"Sure, why not. It'd be handy to have your number, you seem like a helpful person." There you go Kushida, my thanks for your help earlier, I will shove your pedestal up just a little bit more. All the more useful for me later on when you become my tool.

With this, I left the room, heading out to explore some more, and hopefully to find some ice cream.

Authors Notes

Absolutely detest this chapter but it needed to happen i feel. Later chapters won't work if he didn't do this, and personally i feel this getting out of the spotlight is more like Ayanokouji than what ive written so far but honestly im fucjing tired rn. Assignments being a real pain, so finish that up after this. Calculus is fun but not with group work. Enjoy!

Chapter 6 - Blissful Weeks

The next few weeks passed by rather quickly, with only a few but notable events occurring.

The first thing I did was to make sure I understood the other three classes. Eventually, I would need to consider the upper years, especially Nagumo, who seemed to have it out for me, but for at least the moment the biggest dangers would come from Classes 1-A, 1-B and 1-C.

Out of those, I would rank 1-C the most dangerous. The class was rules with an Iron Fist by a student named Ryuuen. At first, he seemed to be a simple brute, a delinquent ruling through fear and prowess alone, however, after watching him for a few days it became clear that wasn't the case. His eyes were full of intelligence, constantly darting around and analysing everything in his field of sight. He was someone who would plan for every eventuality and wouldn't hesitate to use underhanded methods to claim victory. On top of that, he had somehow tamed the black giant Albert, a huge man, which to me feels like the must be more to the situation. From what little I had seen of Ryuuen, and the glimpse of one fight he had, I could tell there was no way he defeated Albert in a straight fight.

In summary, his class was a threat.

Class 1-A would be the highest on my list, except for the giant schism throughout their class. Two potential leaders had emerged, and while it was clear to me that Sakayanagi was by far the more competent one, about half the class favoured the bald man Katsuragi. Both were very different, based on the limited recon I could manage. With a class already suspicious of each other, an outsider would stand out to any of them like a sore thumb, making it very difficult to find out information. Katsuragi, from what I had seen, was an intelligent and calm man, always prepared to smooth a situation over, seemingly never on the offensive. He appears to favour a defense only approach, which while effective usually, would never work in a school like this, with students like Ryuuen and myself, who if outsmarted him would have complete and total victory.

For this reason, I suspected Sakayanagi would come out on top. She seemed aggressive, intelligent, and ruthless despite her

disability. During the first week I witnessed her take control over a pawn named Masumi, effortlessly manipulating the situation. I could tell she thought similarly to me and was possibly the single most dangerous student in my grade, after myself and Kouenji.

Class 1-B was rather pathetic. They had subscribed to a unity through friendship approach, and it seemed that almost everyone in the class was following with it. Living in a fairy tale, it must be nice for them. Their leader, Ichinose, seemed to be a kind caring girl, much like Kushida, but without a hidden personality. She was everyone's friend and cared for them all. Too much, in fact, and there lay her downfall. Expelling one person from her class would break her completely, and most of the class along with her. Their friendship was too strong it became a weakness, and if forced to choose between victory and losing a classmate or defeat, they would instantly choose the latter.

There was one interesting member of the class, however. Kanzaki. He seemed to be one of the smartest and strongest in the class, and from what I witnessed, while he complied with the Fairy Tale lifestyle, it chafed against him. He would be easily used as a tool to accomplish my end, simply by offering him a chance to take the reins of the class, to break free from the weak mindset. Of course, that is the correct decision on his part, as if left as they are currently, class 1-B will end at the bottom, but taking my hand to do so would only lead to his own destruction.

Of course, whilst the analysis of the classes was important, it was the interactions with the less well-known students that made the weeks interesting.

On the third day, after school had ended, I was approached by a student from class A, named Hashimoto. He was an interesting character, having already sword loyalty to Sakayanagi apparently, yet offering his services to me. I certainly didn't trust him at all, but since he was offering to be useful there was no reason to decline him. Apparently, he had read my post on the school forums and concluded that I would best be an ally. In return I would bring him to my class once it reached class A, which he described as "an inevitability with the king in it." A strange statement, but he seemed sincere, even bringing along a contract that we signed. This was the benefit of being well known, that I would not have had if I lived my peaceful life. People, once they know you, seek you out and opportunities like this arise.

I would keep an eye on him, and as long as he was willing to betray his class for me, there was a possibility he would betray me for a better offer, but no sense turning him down.

Kiryuuin had a joy for disrupting both my life and my plans. She

loved to appear out of nowhere, I assume from tracking my phone, and make a scene, so excited to see 'her favourite kouhai'. When I was trying to go unnoticed to pick up information, when I was enjoying a new café I found, when I was extorting points from seniors with Kouenji for lack of anything else to do, she was there. Even once she came to my classroom to pick me up for lunch, an action that earned me a new wave of hate from the boys in my class, and unneeded curiosity from the devil and Matsushita.

She did prove herself useful, as every time she found me our escapades usually ended up humiliating a senior, or fleeing the scene of a crime, some of the small bright points in my life, when things were interesting. Kiryuuin also introduced me to one of, if not her only true friend, Asahina Nazuna. She was a relaxed individual, although I could tell she wasn't someone who would just roll over, she had her own hidden talents. To be expected if she was Kiryuuin picked her to be a friend.

From Asahina, I learned a lot more about Nagumo, information that would be vital to safeguarding myself from his attacks, which she had assured me would come. Apparently, he had been obsessed with me since the first day, both parts jealous of receiving Manabu's recognition and wanting to toy with someone who could pose a challenge. From the information she provided, his weakness became was obvious, and his eventual demise became inevitable.

Over the weeks, my relations with my classmates gradually improved. Horikita was still pointedly ignoring me, but at least she wasn't angry all the time. Instead, it seemed she was grudgingly accepting my existence, which was more than she gave to most of my classmates, refusing to accept that they could be real humans.

The rest of the class was slowly forgiving me for the first day. By keeping my head down, and trying to be as quiet as possible, my existence faded out, and the anger displayed on day 2 never returned. In fact, I guess this is what my life would have been life if I hadn't spoken my mind on the first day of school. At least now I can interact with them, allowing me to act out any plans without overly vigilant suspicion.

But it was important that I be able to interact with them for one specific person.

I also obtained the help of my fellow classmate, Sotomura, or as he had been dubbed, the Professor. Kushida had been kind enough to pass me along his phone number, under the guise of me 'wanting to make friends with other oddballs', and after some convincing, he agreed to help me if needed. Despite his eccentricities, and his constant need to affix the honorific of 'dono' to my name, he really was a valuable pawn. His knowledge of technology was unrivalled,

and in a school where videos and audio recordings make or break a plot, just like on the first day with Sudou, he would be someone very important to have working with me.

While I couldn't count anyone as my friend yet, Hirata had dragged me along shopping a couple of times, along with his harem. Obviously, he was desperate for some male company, as going clothes shopping with five or six girls most days was a drain, especially with a girlfriend like Karuizawa. He disguised his request for me to join him as an attempt to help me interact, since it was 'my first time in a school' and I wanted to learn how to interact properly. Never expected that to backfire on me so fast.

In the end however, it did prove useful. I had the opportunity to interact with Matsushita, Karuiawa and Hirata some more, all three of whom I was interested in figuring out their secrets and getting to know and gain the trust of the girls my classmates deemed cute was an advantage not worth wasting.

The bell rang, breaking me out of my contemplation, signalling the end of class. Speaking of shopping trips, while most of the class was packing up, Hirata was approaching me. I knew what he was going to ask, since he had messaged me earlier asking the same question. He really was very considerate, not wanting to embarrass someone into declining or make them feel forced into accepting, however, much like 1-B, that would be his downfall. He had an incredibly strong sense of devotion to his classmates, and if anything, negative happened, I wasn't sure how he would react, but it would probably be bad.

Perhaps I could cause a situation of some sort. To see his reaction, who he truly is when crushed by failing his class, that would be a sight worth seeing. To bring out the true basis of a person, who they are at their core was the most powerful way to control them.

My father had taught me that lesson.

"Ayanokouji, would you like to come shopping with us for a bit?" By 'us', he meant his harem, though it was clear to anyone not blinded by jealously, otherwise known as most of my classmates, boys, and girls alike, that he was always slightly uncomfortable, and didn't enjoy managing so many girls at once. Though, his personality as a helper to all meant he was never able to tell them off. I had a suspicion that he enjoyed my company, as someone who didn't speak often, but spoke bluntly, without too much consideration. It was a change of pace from the constant flirting and flattery he received, despite already having a girlfriend.

"Sure, why not. I didn't have plans anyway." At this, Horikita grumbled something under her breath, sounding like 'you never do,

loner'. So bold, to insult someone quietly for something you yourself are guilty of.

At my response, most of the girls smiled, surprisingly enough. It seemed they had warmed up to my attitude, overlooking the insults I had pushed on them. However, there was one girl practically grinning, and she was the one I had no interest in conversing in.

Matsushita, as I had suspected early on, was hiding her potential, pretending to be an ordinary student. In spite of her attempts to hide, she constantly needled at me, poking and prodding for information I had discovered, trying to work out whether I was as smart as I claimed, faking it or even holding back. At first her mind games had been enjoyable, something to distract me from the humdrum of boredom, but they quickly grew dull, seeing as she never could pose a legitimate challenge.

Although it seems today, she was ready to go another round. Great.

Walking out of class, Hirata was mobbed by a few girls. Karuizawa was sticking to his arm like glue, and Satou, Shinohara, Mori, and Mii-chan, as she had asked to be called, were all pestering and asking him questions, as per usual. He was looking back at me out the corner of his eye, making sure I was following, but there wasn't a lot he could do, leaving me to follow the conglomerate of estrogen.

The one girl not joining in was Matsushita who took up her usual spot next to me. Clearly, she had no interest in Hirata beyond her friends being infatuated with him, and simply took the opportunity to be her usual annoying self.

"Ne, Ayanokouji, were you even listening in class today? You won't learn anything if you keep staring out the windows. Or maybe you already know it all? Hm?" She was blunt today, reducing her mind games and going all out to attack for answers. Possibly since Author-san isn't smart enough to come up with conversation right now.

"If you keep staring at me in class, I might think you've developed a crush on me." I had felt her gaze on me most of the day, and most days as well. She seemed fascinated with me, and was intent on figuring out just how smart I am.

"Ah. Um, I mean, no stop trying to distract me. I'm just curious, after all. You publish school secrets then do nothing? How could I not be curious?" And back and forth it went, all the way to Keyaki Mall. She really was a pain, but it was one of the few stimulating conversations I have a week, so I put up with it.

I was honestly impressed. After spending a few weeks studying the rest of the grade and getting a sense for what 'ordinary' is,

Matsushita is far beyond that. Even though she hides it, I doubt there would be many people in the school who could keep up with her mind games. It was worth keeping her around just for that. To stave off the boredom.

Arriving at the mall, all the girls headed straight for the clothing outlets, exactly like last time. I found myself standing near the doorway with Hirata and Matsushita, watching five teenagers run amuck, with no hesitation or consideration for prices.

"They really don't think, do they." Matsushita commented exactly what I was thinking. "If they considered the situation, they wouldn't be acting this foolish. I'm loathe to criticise my friends, but honestly, they have no sense of control."

"I don't want to say it, but I have to agree with you. After we finish school, they won't have any sense of monetary control. No matter how many times I warn them..." For Hirata to be criticising his friends, he really must be at the end of his rope.

"Hey, Hirata, come tell us what you think of these clothes!" And just like that Karuizawa dragged Hirata away from his last remaining point of freedom, and into the viper's nest that was ladieswear.

Surprisingly, Matsushita didn't move to join him. Even during other trips when she spent time trying to interrogate me, she still left to go pick out clothes.

"You aren't shopping today?"

"I'm not as foolish as the rest of them. I read your post, and I'm pretty sure everything you said is correct. I've already spent too many points as it is, so home cooked meals for me from now on." A sense of self control. Far different from most of the girls in the class, Matsushita, along with Horikita seemed to understand that my 'guesses' were accurate and were controlling their points. It was especially impressive that she could manage this, especially when her main friendship group was composed of the biggest shopaholics in the grade.

I had spent many days considering the best way to make use of Matsushita, and finally reached a conclusion: she had no hidden past, no secrets, or any way to completely exploit her. However, since she also believed that reaching class A was essential, she had faith in my analysis skills, and this was her way of getting on my good side in order to rise with me. She would never be an important person to me, and since I had no real control over her, her uses would be limited, but she had potential for smaller tasks.

If she believed that we were working towards the same goal of Class A, and had faith in my abilities, it was extremely likely she would follow my orders, rationalising it as acting in her own self-

interests. To ensure her belief in me, as while she was not valuable there was no purpose in ignoring any tool, even one kept in reserve, I would have to display some of my skills, enough to convince her that I was worth betting on for her own success.

It would also give me the chance to escape from this dull shopping trip.

Looking around the store, it was clear that corners had been cut when it came to the shelves and hangers for clothes. Barely staying upright as it is, if one of the supports was taken out, they would topple over with the slightest push.

Which was exactly what I intended.

"Pass me that rod, Matsushita. I want to try something." Looking hesitant, as she could probably tell its purpose, she walked over to the shelf I had indicated, picked up the beam and came back.

"What are you trying to do with that? It's there to hold up the shelf, it could fall over without it." As expected, she recognised the danger, but didn't realise that was exactly what I wanted.

"Actually, the rod has no purpose. The whole point of that. Was. This." As I said that last word, I threw the bundled-up shirt that had been hanging next to me. It hit the roof, causing one of the ceiling panels to fall, landing directly on the shelf missing the support at just the right angle. For a moment, we stared, frozen in anticipation, and then it tipped sideways, collapsing into the shelf next to it, and the next, and the next, before the final one fell in front of the changing room, blocking everyone in.

Across the room I could see Hirata staring at me in shock. He was probably wondering if it had been on purpose or an accident, and why Matsushita was cackling away beside me. I quickly transferred Hirata 100,000 points, along with a message 'for the damages' before sprinting out of the store, leaving Matsushita leaning against the wall, trying not to fall from laughter and the voices of Hirata's harem calling out in panic and fear, shouting for their hero to come rescue them. Truly pathetic, but this incident made all the shopping trips worth it.

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Looking to finish writing the first arc (first light novel storyline) this week, so i got time to plan the second one. It's honestly the most boring book and I'm a little stuck for how i want the Sudou situation to go, if i even do that. We shall see.

Chapter 6.5 - A Casual Game of Chess

I was sitting at a table in a park, my latest victim having stormed off after being absolutely crushed when he approached me.

"Afternoon, Ayanokouji. What would you be doing here that would leave that poor third year so upset?" Nagumo. Apparently he'd come with his goon squad to investigate what I'm doing.

"Just playing some chess with seniors. Is there a rule against such behavior?"

"No. But swindling money is frowned upon not just by the school, but the student council as well. Which leaves it up to me, the Vice President, to teach you some discipline, to teach you to respect your seniors." Apparently, my lackluster greeting had offended him.

Nagumo absolutely didn't care that I was wagering points with seniors over games of chess. From my investigations, he had conducted much more rule breaking activities than I had, some of them even bordering on illegality. Obviously, he was here to assert his dominance over me, to prove that there was no reason for Manabu to favour me over him. Seriously, that egotistical attitude of his would be his downfall. By assuming the world was his to rule, it was very easy to push him in a certain direction.

One day I would be forced to deal with that, but not today.

Five of his classmates stood behind him, probably trying to look intimidating and try to push me around. It wouldn't work, but if it made him feel secure who am I to take a dummy from a baby.

"I'd like to play. There's no problem is there? Same rules you gave everyone else, and we wager a lot more points than you have before. With your string of victories, I'm sure you can agree that's reasonable?" He was trying to goad me. Poor choice, Nagumo. This game was what I wanted in the first place. If I was going to be subtle about earning points through chess, I wouldn't have posted the challenge on the school forums. Your insecurity leading you here was my end goal.

"Very well. Same rules for everyone. I earned 750,000 points from my games so far, so I'll put up that much. Winner gets the lot, you play white, so to make it fair in the event of a draw or stalemate I take three quarters of the pot. Agreed?" I held out my hand to him, which he shook and responded.

"Agreed" Seating himself at the table, he observed the white

pieces, before taking out his phone. "Unfortunately, the rules you mentioned never prohibited using a chess engine. Sure, you may be good, but I can use a computer and crush you. You made a mistake giving me white, now I can't lose." He leered at me. What a moron. Obviously I left those out of the rules. Now he had an overwhelming advantage over me, there was no way I could escape from the situation. Or so he should think.

"That was an oversight on my part. I guess I'll just have to play my best, and hope to not lose."

Nagumo began the game with e4, to which I replied with c5. If I wanted a draw against a human, the berlin would be my best option, however his phone, probably running some browser version of stockfish, would always aim for a draw if there was no clear win, to trade off all the pieces if it determined the game even. By following it religiously, his own tool would lead to my victory.

The pieces began moving across the board, an open Sicilian, Najdorf variation was the opening played. Pieces were traded, pawns were pushed, and the game remained completely even. Despite this, every move Nagumo had played so far was perfect. I had been relying on the browser engine to be flawed, to cut corners in order to run quickly without the brute force a GPU engine would have, but it seemed it was good enough to match me anyway.

Of course, it was rare that I lost to a computer, only happening five times in my last year at the white room, all of which from black, but it didn't mean the game was simple. There were many moves where I had to stop and think, consider up to twenty moves ahead, before deciding on the best course of action. All this time, however, Nagumo was getting increasingly frustrated. Even with a computer aiding him, he couldn't make any progress in the game, a draw becoming more and more inevitable.

Eventually, his computer should have told him to trade queens. It was the best move in the position, in fact the only move that didn't lead to black outright winning, but based on my own analysis, the computer was probably saying trading would lead to a draw. While he hesitated, contemplating whether he should trade or not, Horikita Manabu decided to finally make his presence known. I had messaged him earlier, asking him to come over to supervise a game, and he had arrived just after Nagumo did, and watched from a nearby tree as we played.

"An impressive game so far. Not an easy position to play from. From my own experience, as limited as it is, wouldn't trading queens be the best option here?" The appearance of the Student Council President galvanized Nagumo into action, and he swiftly traded the queens.

"Horikita-senpai, what a surprise. You seem to have caught us in a tense match, with rather high stakes. What was it you bet again, Ayanokouji? 750,000 points? Be prepared to lose them." In front of his idol, Nagumo had no choice but to act confident and cocky. While he was terrified on the inside, not understanding how I was keeping up perfectly with a computer, he looked completely composed. Ignoring my dislike for the man, his acting skills were incredible.

"Tense? I wouldn't have thought so when you have a computer aiding you. Or would you say that Ayanokouji is a better player than a computer. Because if so, that's incredibly high praise to give to someone." Nagumo ground his teeth but didn't respond. As much as he wanted to, there was no way out of this situation.

The game continued, and slowly more pieces were traded off the board, before eventually I sacrificed my rook to take his last pawn, ending the game in a draw.

"An incredible game, Ayanokouji. I doubt there would be many grandmasters who could keep up with you."

"I just have a lot of experience playing against computers. Growing up I had no one else to compete with, and I got very used to matching their patterns."

"An impressive performance, nonetheless. Now, I believe there was a 750,000 point wager?"

Nagumo transferred me the 375,000 points, since we had drawn not won, before rising from the table and leaving in silence with his goons, not even shaking my hand or congratulating me.

"How rude of him. I should warn you, Ayanokouji, you have poked the hind of a bear. Take care with him or you may find yourself out of school faster than you expect."

"I knew exactly what I was doing, especially by calling you over for added affect. He is one of the few people who could make my life interesting. I see no downside from this situation."

"I would like to see you back up that claim this year. For you to face off against Nagumo would be a battle I would very much enjoy watching." Manabu sighed for a moment, before sitting in the chair Nagumo had just vacated. "Would you mind? I haven't played for a while, and it would be an honour to play against someone as talented as you."

"Why not. I don't have anywhere else to be."

With that we reset the pieces and a new game began.

Authors Notes

When I was writing chapter 6 i really wanted to do a bit more on what Ayanokouji was doing in his spare time, but I could never

make it work. Hence, this chapter. Just a short one, adds a bit of depth to Nagumo/Manabu/Ayanokouji relationship, and was fun to sit down and write.

It's short so I'm breaking my every second day schedule, which as been working well so I'll stick to that, and posting this. Enjoy!

Chapter 7 - Swimming

Coming up with chapter titles sucks

"Good morning, Yamauchi!"

"Good morning, Ike!"

Everyone knows exactly what it is from those two lines right? They're iconic.

Ike and Yamauchi greeted each other as the former arrived at class. For two students who never seemed excited for school, even sleeping through most days, or not showing up at all, for them to be excited this morning made me immensely suspicious.

"Whew, man! I was looking forward to today so much that I barely slept last night!"

"Ah ha ha! This school is just the best! I can't believe that it's almost time for swimming! And when I say swimming, I mean girls. And when I say girls, I mean girls in school swimsuits!"

Oh. It's the day we go to the pool, so of course they would act like degenerates. I can see out of the corner of my eye, every single girl in the class glaring daggers at them. Understandable, there was a reason their nickname was the three perverts, along with Miyamoto. Surprisingly enough, Sudou had stayed away from them enough to avoid receiving the same label.

I can't blame them. Although for completely different reasons, I too was excited to go to the pool and swim. Finally, I would have a break from the mundane class life, and be able to compete properly with Koueni. Normally I wouldn't care for competition, since I would inevitably come out on top, but so far, in the small games we had played, only in chess was I able to defeat him, and narrowly at that too. After a game every few days over the last month, the score stood at 1 win and 12 draws.

But in swimming, with proper timers and racing, it was almost impossible to tie. One of us had to come out on top today and gain a lead over claiming the title of ultimate existence.

Hmm. The boys were huddled up in a circle, with even the professor joining them, all whispering about something. If they were that desperate to keep it a secret, I suppose I had an obligation to find out.

"What are you talking about?" Walking over, I inserted myself right into the conversation. A majority of the boys in the class had

joined, making it a very conspicuous huddle.

"The Professor is going to rank the girls' breast sizes for us. If we're lucky, he'll get some pictures with his phone." Please die, Ike

"Hey, hey." Sudou visibly drew back in response to Ike's plan. If the girls found out about it, the consequences would be severe. Good Sudou, consider your options and realise that this is terrible.

While I could allow them to go through with it, and later expose them for punishment, I would rather know how the school punishes incidents first. Experimenting and manipulating students in other classes would be a necessary step to determine the demerit system, and I had no intention to expel these students before I could figure out their worth, if they had any.

"What? We're gonna peep on the girls!? Great idea Ike and Yamauchi!" I made sure to raise my voice just loud enough for the rest of the class to hear. And like small children finally realising how much shit they're in for drawing on the walls, Ike and Yamauchi turned and gazed into the eyes of death. Every single girl in the room, except Kushida, who was pointedly ignoring the situation, was prepared for murder.

"Ahaha... funny jokes Ayanokouji..."

"Yeah... like we'd ever do that..."

While no one bought their bullshit excuses, at least the intensity of the room dropped back to normal, and Ike and Yamauchi were spared a classic medieval lynching.

Satisfied with the result, I moved back to my seat, ignoring the glares I too was receiving. While some of the girls had realised I was shutting the incident down, the rest had assumed I was planning to participate, and had also marked me for death along with the perverts. That was fine, I didn't really care. The end goal of this little foreplay was to make Ike and Yamauchi recognise their lower than the lowest status in the class. The look of despair on their faces, the horrific realisation that to the girls they lusted for they were nothing more than dogs, was worth every bit of social respect I had thrown away.

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took the opportunity to change quickly and leave, in order to avoid attention. From my observations, only Hirata and a boy called Akito noticed me, the latter staring inquisitively at me. He also had a fairly fit body, possibly from his time in the archery club, but it seems more than that. Perhaps he had been a fighter beforehand, many of the muscles he had built would mainly be used combatively. Perhaps I should ask him some time, although it was more likely that he would approach me himself. It wouldn't hurt to have a sparring partner.

I walked along the pool for a bit, until I reached around the halfway point. It was identical to the one I had trained in, although there had also been different kinds at that place, with deeper sections for more intense activities.

"Ah, demon-boy, the day is here. Our first chance for a proper competition." Kouenji walked up beside me, wearing nothing but a red speedo. I admire his courage, and somehow, he makes it work.

"I'm looking forward to our race. Don't disappoint me."

"Oh, fear not, I'm sure I can match your talents. Perhaps we shall go for a record today, sub 20 seconds perhaps? Ah, but only if we were capable of such a thing."

"I suppose we aren't yet. But I doubt there is anyone else who can even come close."

As we spoke the rest of the boys exited the changing room.

"Whoa, this school is something else! It's even better than the city pool, don't you think?" Was it really that impressive? I didn't have any form of reference, so I couldn't tell myself, but it was a pool to the proper standards, so what was the point in a pool smaller than it even existing? Another facet of normal life I still don't know.

"What about the girls? Aren't they here yet?" Ike looked around, sniffing the air like a dog. They never give up, do they.

"Well, if I'm going to be competing at full strength today, I must perform some warmup stretches. A perfect existence such as myself can't have a pulled muscle." And with that, the enigma that was Kouenji walked off to the nearby grassy area, where he began to do some very revealing stretches. I suspect he had no intention of seriously stretching, because he said this just as the girls emerged from the changing rooms. Obviously, he was intending to flex his body, as a display of superiority.

Honestly, it was disturbing to watch. I'm fairly sure that he had no interest with the girls in our class, due to the fact he was constantly out with one senior or another, but instead trying to garner hate from the rest of the boys. An interesting strategy to inspire competition, but I suspect pointless. Even if they try their all, no one could match him.

Meanwhile, Ike and the perverts were staring at the girls emerging from the changing room, specifically Kushida. I must admit she was attractive, and I could see the alure for their lust over her, but it was beyond perverted behaviour. How she keeps a smile up around them, I cannot fathom. Inside, she must be disgusted by their actions. It was obvious from her eyes, if you looked close enough: the boys were dead to her.

Unfortunately for the perverted dogs, a majority of the girls had refrained from swimming, and instead were watching from the observation tower. The pervert's fascination quickly turned to despair when they realised most of the girls wouldn't be participating, a couple even falling to their knees, spirits crushed.

"Hm. It seems you are at least correct to call yourself superior over the boys. Although being superior for simply not ogling every girl in sight is a rather low bar to set." Ah, Horikita had slipped past most of the class and made her way over to me. Over the last week our relationship had grown slightly, to the point where she would be willing to greet me in the morning, ask obvious questions just to annoy me and stab me with a compass.

"It's just common decency, after all. I value my self-control rather highly. Such a thing as the female body can't be allowed to distract me in an important situation." What a dull conversation. What did she expect me to respond with? How about some payback for the compass jabs? "Or perhaps you're upset I'm not staring at you? Granted you have a good body, but that personality kills all interest." A kick to the shins and a red face. Is it blush or anger, I still can't quite differentiate between the two.

"How rude. You've become almost as bad as that narcissist flaunting his body over there." Kouenji was now doing one-armed pushes, which were definitely not a warm-up, but a majority of the girls were staring at him, which the boys were beginning to notice. "Ayanokouji, do you exercise? You do have a good body, one that can even come close to matching Kouenji's. It must have taken considerable effort to reach that point."

"I'd rather not talk about it, the effort to reach here isn't a memory I'd like to revisit." She nodded once, and left the conversation there, respecting my wishes. Comparing her to the girl I first met on the bus, she really had come a long way, although her respect only transferred to me, someone she deemed worthy of recognition. It was progress, but the rest of the class was lower than dirt to her.

"Are you a good swimmer, Horikita? You definitely have the physique for it." She was fit, and despite her narrow frame, her arms and legs had definition to them, narrow but strong.

"I would consider myself to be better than average, but not particularly outstanding." And now a conscious answer. The mind of Horikita was truly a contradictory one.

"All right, everyone, line up!" A macho-looking middle-aged man, the kind of guy who apparently devoted himself to sports, gathered everyone together and started the class. He looked like a PE teacher, but also seemed kind of guy who was attractive to men and women alike.

"There are sixteen of you, huh? I thought there would've been more, but this is all right."

Clearly, some of the students in that count had ditched class, but it didn't appear to frustrate him.

"After you warm up, I want to see what you can really do. Swim for me," the coach said.

"Excuse me, sir. I can't really swim, though..."

A lone boy sheepishly raised his hand and spoke up.

"Since you have me as your teacher, you'll be swimming by summertime. Don't worry about a thing."

"Well, we don't really need to force ourselves to swim, do we? It's not like we're going to the beach or anything."

"No way. I don't mind at all if you're bad at swimming now, but I'll make sure you guys are winners in the end. Besides, being able to swim will definitely come in handy later in life. Definitely."

Swimming would definitely come in handy? Well, I suppose knowing how to swim would be convenient. However, hearing a teacher say something like that made me feel uncomfortable. Perhaps the school would have a test where swimming was an important skill. It was the only reason for both the mandatory lessons, and the coach's enthusiasm.

The teacher asked us to swim for about fifty meters. Students who could not swim were allowed to touch the bottom of the pool with their feet. I hadn't been in a pool since last summer. The water must have been temperature-controlled because I didn't feel chilled when I entered and adjusted right away. After getting in, I started to swim lightly.

After fifty meters, I waited for everyone else to finish.

"He he he, that was an easy win for me. Did you all see my super swimming skills?" Ike crowed. He'd swum expertly, and now got out of the pool with a smug, self-satisfied grin. No, Ike, your performance wasn't really that different from anyone else's, in fact it was rather pathetic.

"Well, it looks like everyone can swim, for the most part."

"Of course, sir. Back in junior high, people called me 'the flying fish,' you know."

"I see. In that case, I'll have you start competing against each other. We'll separate groups by gender. Fifty-meter freestyle."

"C-compete?! Are you serious?" Ike cried.

"I'll give out a special bonus to the first-place winner: 5000 points. The student who comes in last place, however, will have to take supplementary lessons. Get ready." So private points are on offer, even in class. It wouldn't hurt to win some more, and I had already agreed to compete with Kouenji, so it seemed I'd be going all out.

"Because we don't have very many girls, I'll split you into two groups of five people, and the student with the fastest overall time will be the winner. As for the boys, I'll look at the top five finishing times and then move on to a final round." So, I couldn't just cruise through the races. If I wanted to guarantee the finals, and I did, I would have to put at least a little effort in to get in the top five.

My only real competition would be from Hirata, Sudou and Akito, as the rest of the boys were extremely unfit, or at least had no swimming talent from the drowning actions I had watched earlier.

The girls went first, with Horikita being in the first group of five. The whistle blew, and five of the girls dove into the water. Horikita was in the second lane. She took the lead at the beginning of the race and kept her distance from the others, maintaining her position at the front of the pack. She swam confidently, effortlessly covering the fifty meters. Her time was approximately twenty-eight seconds, a quick time for a high school girl. Horikita slowly got out of the pool and went to the side, not even appearing out of breath.

"Not bad. You do have some talent when it comes to swimming."

"When considering who I was facing, there wasn't much of a challenge." She wasn't wrong there, the person who took second was Kushida with 31 seconds, a huge lead in a swimming race. However, I suspected that it would be Odonera, not Horikita that won the girls group. From what I had heard she was in the swimming club, and clearly had a body made for swimming.

And not much later I was proven right, with Onodera taking first place in the girls group with 26 seconds.

"I assume you are going to win your group?"

"I don't have much choice. If I want any competition, I need to face Kouenji in the finals, and taking first place is the best method to ensure this."

"Hmph. You are very confident in your abilities, it seems. I'll be here to watch you fail, don't worry." There we go, the ego returned. Just what I wanted.

"So, you think I won't get the fastest time in the class? Are you willing to put points on it!?" Just like this morning I raised my

voice, catching the attention of most of the class. "I bet 10,000 points that I win the finals. I'll give even odds to anyone who thinks I won't." Apparently, even though it was clear I was fit, had overwhelming confidence and seemed to not be concerned about going into debt with points, lots of the class fell for my trap.

"Hirata will win, it's obvious." Onodera, why. I had such high hopes for you, but it seems your crush is impacting your reasoning.

"Nah, Kouenji will. He's clearly the strongest in the class, there's no way you can match him." At least that was a respectable argument. Even I wasn't 100% confident I could beat him, so claiming he could beat me wasn't foolish.

"So, Horikita, you in or not?"

"Fine. I bet 10,000 points that Kouenji beats you in the finals. Deal?" At least she didn't make a stupid claim, that I wouldn't reach it, or that Sudou was faster. Speaking of Sudou...

"Oi, Ayanokouji, I want in. 10,000 points, I beat you in the finals. You may be strong, but I know my limits, and I'm pretty quick."

In the end, I made a bet with 9 people overall. And as I predicted, after the heats were over, the five finalists were Hirata, Akito, Sudou, Kouenji and myself.

"Get ready to pay my points Ayanokouji. My time was two seconds faster than you, theres no hope now." Ignoring Sudou, who was about to take massive mental damage, I looked at Kouenji. Both of us had come around 26 seconds, enough to guarantee a spot, but not faster than Hirata's 25.5 and Sudou's 24.

"Hey Kouenji. You ready to actually try now? It's time to see who's faster."

"I agree demon-boy. No more holding back from either of us." Sudou's eyes widen at his response, suddenly worried about how fast I could be.

"Wait wait wait, hold on. You weren't trying? How fast are you!" I looked him right in the eye, before stepping onto the starting block.

"Prepare your 10,000 Sudou. You don't have a chance."

With that final statement, the coach blew his whistle, and the race was on. In the corner of my eye, I could see Kouenji flying through the water, keeping pace with me the entire time. The other three had fallen far behind, and the race was between just the two of us. The water was rushing past my head, speeding through the cool liquid, faster than I had ever swum before.

I reached the end, tapping the wall at practically the same time as Kouenji. We both clambered out of the pool and looked at the coach. The other three had just finished, multiple seconds behind us, but all eyes were on Kouenji and I.

"Kouenji's time was 21.6 seconds." A smirk grew on his face, it

was a time to be proud of. It was possible he'd never had someone to compete with before and being able to do so made the effort all the more rewarding.

"Ayanokouji, with 21.2 seconds." Everyone froze hearing those words, even Kouenji, before he broke his position, and started laughing.

"It's your victory demon-boy. I may have barely lost when it comes to swimming, but remember I still am the perfect existence." And with his self-assured swagger, he sauntered off to the changing rooms.

Perhaps doing something because you want to can bring out more in a person. I'd never swum this fast at the White Room, perhaps because I had no interest in doing so. An interesting thought to contemplate.

"They were so fast!" "How is that possible!" "They're incredible!" "Are they even human!" "Noooo my points!"

That last exclamation was shared by a few of the people who had wagered against me, realising that they owed me 10,000 points. For someone who had managed to swindle over three million at this point, it was worthless, but the blow to their psyche when the received barely any next month would make this 10,000 even more painful.

After collecting my points for wining from the coach, and eight of the people who had bet against me, I made my way over to where Horikita was standing.

"So, you really can back up your claims of superiority. I must admit, you are as good as you said." She admitted it. This was the final stage to break her flawed mental. Now all that was left was to convince her of the worth of using others instead of discarding them, and she could become a formidable opponent, someone who could make life interesting.

"Don't worry about your points. The fact that you were hesitant first, and at least only bet Kouenji could beat me is enough for me. Anyway, you'll need all the points you can get next month"

"I suppose so, if your theories are correct."

She didn't seem to have more to say, so I left her standing there and made my way back to the changing room. Now my classmates knew mine and Kouenji's full strength, they would be more willing to accept our attitude. Although they wouldn't thank me for taking their points, it would teach a valuable lesson to not doubt me, a lesson I could turn on them when the opportunity arose, to bring the grade crashing down.

Only two more days until the next month and I assumed the class system would be revealed on that day. Finally, then, the fun could

begin.

Authors Notes

Back to regularly scheduled updates. I will probably write more short chapters and add them in the future like 6.5, because that was fun. Anyways, reaching the pointy end of arc 1, things getting intense. I've finished writing it now, so shouldn't be any delays at least for this. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 8 - Test Time

It was the last day of the month, and many of my classmates were talking about what to spend their remaining points on. Apparently, they considered it a smart idea to use them all up now as if they would expire tomorrow, and 'it doesn't matter, since we get another 100,000 points tomorrow anyway'. How they came to that conclusion, I cannot fathom. There is no evidence to suggest it's a good idea, conversely there is overwhelming evidence saying that they won't get 100,000 points next semester, yet these morons refuse to listen to reason.

I didn't realise it was possible for people to become so corrupted with greed that they ignored any caution, so caught up with their idea of themselves that they couldn't rationalise that advice from other people was accurate. And they call Kouenji the narcissist. At least his actions could be justified demonstrably, which if my suspicions were right, he would have another chance to do so today.

Hirata was moving throughout the room, going from girl to girl, friend to friend, desperately pleading with them to not spend all their points, and save some, just a few, any at all, but it seemed his efforts would be fruitless.

Even Kushida, who so far had acquiesced with everything that happened, had taken a stance, recommending people save points. Based on her behaviour, if people asked her for points, she would give them some, so she was obviously trying to prevent that. For people to continue to hold her in such high esteem as the 'best friend in the grade', she had no choice but to help however she could, even if it meant hurting herself in the process. Why she kept this act up, and I was certain it was an act at this point, I had no idea, but after tomorrows reveal, she would snap. It was inevitable.

When the bell rang, Chiyabashira walked into the noisy classroom. Her entrance didn't alter the students' behaviour, still jabbering on about what they would buy. "Quiet down a little, please. Today's lesson will be a bit serious. It's the end of the month, so we're going to have a short test. Please pass these to the back." She handed out the papers to the students in the front row. Eventually, the single-sheet test reached my desk. It contained questions in the five main subjects.

Students began to exclaim in outrage at this announcement. Most of them hadn't been listening in class, either sleeping or playing with their phone so they had learned nothing in the past month. The audacity of these defectives, to ignore class for a month then claim a test was unfair. It astounds me.

"This test is just for future reference. It won't be reflected in your report cards. There is no risk involved, so don't worry. Of course, cheating is prohibited." Because that wasn't completely suspicious. Everything the school did had a purpose, including giving us this test, so there had to be a hidden hint somewhere. Whether there were hidden punishments, or the test itself was a second layer of a test wasn't clear, but there was certainly more to this than just a simple exam.

This was the perfect chance to compete with Kouenji. I had assumed there would be some form of exam at the end of the month, in order for the school to diagnose how the students were progressing and I was right. However, there was just one problem.

"Sensei, I have a problem with this exam. It's far too easy." At this complaint the classroom exploded into noise, people yelling at me, complaining that it was already too hard, that I should just shut up and die.

"I must concur with demon-boy. How can we possibly compete when we will both score perfectly? This is an insult to the skills of a perfect existence." Now the class was also insulting Kouenji. The entire class, bar a few of the academic students, was entirely out of control.

"QUIET! Look, I can't change the test to suit the needs of two egotistical show-offs. If you want to compete so badly, why not see who finishes first, hm? Now start the test, you have two hours." With that Chabashira sat back down, and the class quieted down to begin their tests.

Normally I would have taken my time, relaxed. Watched those around me, learn who is struggling and who is smart. But none of that mattered. My mind cleared; the only important thing was finishing this test as fast as possible. My pen scribbled across each page, simple geometry, multiple choice history facts, basic physics of motion – it was pathetically simple. Most of this I had learned at 7, in the White Room. To think that students could struggle with it was laughable. That place truly did make geniuses. Even all of those who failed were still far beyond most of these students.

And at the 14-minute mark, my hand shot up into the air, at exactly the same time Kouenji's did. He smirked at me, recognising the humour in the ridiculous situation. The chances that people finish a test in exactly the same time is astronomical. It would mean

solving and writing at the same speed as each other, something that when measured should never occur in such a chaotic environment. Yet we truly were each other's equal.

Chiyabashira came over and took our papers from us, since we were done, although she didn't allow us to leave. Kouenji decided to take the time to file his nails, while I took a nap at my desk, ignoring the stares from most of the class, but particularly Horikita, Matsushita and Yukimura, the three whom I regarded the smartest academically after Kouenji and I.

They would probably not believe we had actually completed the test, but when sensei returned with the results tomorrow, it would become clear that we had. I was confident we had both scored full marks. I had seen those sorts of questions before, and none of them were challenging. Those last three for maths, though. They were interesting. For the school to put what I assumed to be third year at least, if not college level questions on our test, there had to be a reason. They were probably the hint the school was giving with the test. Perhaps...

No point speculating now. As there was far too little information, and I wasn't sure whether it would even matter, I was much better off filing the information away for later consideration, than to worry about it for the next hour.

□□□

Kouenji, as per usual was relaxing at his desk, with the biggest smirk I had ever seen on his face. Obviously, he understood the situation, but unlike the rest of the class he had no reason to be concerned. Over the past month we had both saved up large sums of points won or extorted from seniors, having foreseen such an event occurring.

Horikita entered the classroom a little later than usual today, however no one noticed, all too distracted with their lack of points. When she reached her desk, she stared at me for a moment, before taking her seat, deep in thought.

The bell rang to signal the start of homeroom, and soon afterward, Chiyabashira strode into the room, holding a rolled-up poster. Her expression today was even more stern than usual.

"All right, your morning homeroom is about to begin. Before we get started, does anyone have any questions? If so, now is the time to speak." She appeared totally convinced that the students had questions they wanted answered, probably knowing just how stupid most of the class was. Immediately, several students raised their hands.

"Um, I checked my point balance this morning, but I only got 12,000 points deposited. We get 100,000 points on the first of every month, don't we?

"Hondou, I already explained this before, didn't I? Points are deposited on the first day of the month. I've confirmed that points were wired this month without any issues."

This seemed to stump a few people in the class, although slowly a horrific realisation was dawning on those who had at least a few brain cells.

"Are you kids really that dumb?" Was she angry or delighted? I was getting an ominous vibe from Chiyabashira.

"Dumb? What?" As Hondou stupidly repeated her words, Chiyabashira looked at him sharply.

"Sit down, Hondou. I'll explain once more," she said. "All the points were deposited. I can assure you there were no errors or miscalculations in the transfers"

"Sensei, please put them out of their misery. I understand your desire to torment such defective students, but please, to be in a room of such ignorance is harmful to a perfect existence such as myself." Kouenji finally intervened, putting an end to this plain foreplay between Chabashira and Hondou.

"Very well Kouenji. It is deplorable how few of you noticed my hints. And then, when it was explained to you, you refused to listen out of some misguided sense of ego. For crying out loud, the student who figured it out and told you is in your class!" She

pointed to me as she said this, dragging the attention onto me and away from Kouenji. "Every other class figured it out, yet with every advantage you all failed. How deplorable."

In response to this harsh nature from a teacher who previously didn't seem to care about us, the classroom exploded.

"Sensei, may I please ask you a question? I'm afraid I still don't understand." Hirata raised his hand. He appeared to ask on behalf of his classmates rather than out of selfish concern. Just as I'd expect of the de facto class leader. Even now, he took the initiative. "Can you please tell us why we didn't receive any points? We won't completely understand otherwise."

That was certainly true.

"A total of sixty-three absences and late arrivals. Three hundred and twelve incidences of talking or using a cell phone in class. That is quite a few infractions over one month. In this school, your class's results are reflected in the points that you receive. As a result, you wasted almost all of the 100,000 points that you should have received. That's what happened."

"I should have explained this all to you on the day of the entrance ceremony. This school measures its students' true abilities. This time, you were evaluated as being worth next to nothing. That's all."

Boom. There it was. The class finally realised how badly they messed up. To think they actually thought that they could get away with lazing around and not paying attention, whilst also receiving 100,000 points a month was laughable. It was beyond stupidity. The ego of my classmates was unmeasurable, to think themselves superior students whilst acting worse than toddlers.

I heard a pencil moving against paper. Horikita seemed to be tallying the number of absences, tardy arrivals, and instances of talking in class down in her notebook, perhaps trying to make sense of the situation.

"Sensei. I do not recall hearing you explain that to us before—"

"What? Are you incapable of understanding something unless it's explained in detail?"

"Of course. There was never any talk about reducing our points. Had that been explained beforehand, I'm sure we would have avoided being late or talking during class."

"That is a rather bizarre argument, Hirata. It is certainly true that I don't recall explaining the rules of point distribution. However, didn't you all learn in elementary school not to be late or talk in class? Was that not taught throughout your elementary and junior high schools?"

"Well, that's—"

"I'm sure that in nine years of compulsory education, you learned

that being late and talking in class are bad things. And now you say that you can't understand this because I haven't explained it to you? I'm afraid your reasoning is flimsy. If you had simply acted properly, then your points would not have dropped almost to zero. This comes down to you taking personal responsibility."

There was no way for anyone to refute her perfectly sound argument. Everyone knew that bad behaviour didn't pay.

"Having just entered your first year of high school, did you honestly think you'd receive 100,000 points every month with no strings attached? At a school established by the Japanese government for the express purposes of training gifted people? That's unthinkable. Try using some common sense. Why would you leave it to chance?"

Sensei told them exactly what I'd been thinking. I could see that she was enjoying this. To crush their expectations, to shred their egos to the ground was something she had been longing for after a month of insolence and disrespect. And fair enough. Perhaps I should lend her a hand. The more crushed they were the more fun their reactions, right?

The bell rang, signalling the end of homeroom.

"It looks like we spent too much time yammering. I hope that you understood the gist of it. Well, it's about time that we switch to our main topic." From the tube she carried, she removed a white rolled-up poster and spread it out. She stuck the poster to the blackboard with some magnets. The still-confused students stared blankly at the poster.

"Are these...the results for each class?" Horikita tentatively took a guess. She was probably right. Class A through Class D were listed. To the side was a row of numbers that went up to a maximum of four digits. Class D had 120. Class C had 730. Class B had 905. And at the top was Class A, with a total of 990. In this case, 1000 points would mean 100,000 yen, wouldn't it? Every class had apparently lost points.

I was surprised in particular that class C had retained so many. Obviously, Class A with its superior students would be fine, and Class B with their fairy tale unity would have no problem holding onto points, but Class C, and especially Ryuuen, were very violent. If points were deducted for that sort of behaviour, the fact that they retained so many was impressive.

"You've all been doing whatever you pleased this past month. The school has no intention of preventing you from doing what you want. Your actions, such as being late or talking during class, only affect the points you receive. The same goes for how you use your points. How you choose to spend is entirely up to you. We have not

put any restrictions on point usage."

"This isn't fair, though! We can't enjoy our student lives like this!" shouted Ike, who'd stayed quiet until now.

Yamauchi wailed in incredible agony. Like many people in the class he had used up all his points.

"Look here, morons. Every other class got points. The number of points we gave you for the first month should be plenty for you to live on."

"B-but, how do the other classes still have so many points left? That's weird..."

"I've already told you, there's nothing unfair about it. All of the classes were scored using the same rules. Despite that, they didn't lose as many as you. That's the truth."

"But...why is there such a difference in our point values?" Hirata also seemed to have noticed that the numbers were too tidy.

"Do you finally understand now? Do you see why you were placed in Class D?"

"The reason why we were placed in Class D? Weren't we simply accepted into this school?"

"Huh? But classes are normally divided up like this, right?"

"Sensei you're too cruel. Just tell them instead of going for complete destruction."

"Yes, demon-boy and I shall take over from here. It's much more fun that way."

Chabashira cracked a smile at our statements. Obviously, she found it entertaining for us to be the ones to destroy the class instead of her.

"Go ahead. You already figured everything out so you may as well tell them."

"Thank you, sensei. Now, if you actually paid attention to the classes, you would notice a significant difference between ours and the rest." The word defects seemed to trigger mild PTSD from the first day attack we launched. This was round two, and the class stood even less of a chance this time.

"Exactly right, Ayanokouji-boy. Comparing the classes, Class D is the collection of garbage in our year, the last bastion for failures in the school. All of you are defective products. That's why your actions have led to this and inconvenienced us two perfect existences."

Most of the class seemed to get furious at this. Not only did they receive barely any points, but now they narcissists were on a double pronged attack, with the teacher's permission to do so.

"Sensei, stop them!" "Yeah, they can't talk to us that way!" "Why look down on us, you're in just as much trouble as the rest of us!"

Nonsense was spewing from my classmates' mouths, but instead of responding, Kouenji and I just looked to Chabashira to deal the final blow.

"Why should I stop them, everything they've said so far is correct."

At her conformation, most of the class shattered. They fell back in their chairs, souls crushed, broken. The students who considered themselves superior, like Horikita and Yukimura were furious at this. Being lumped in with defectives while unable to admit they have a defect seemed to force them to hold themselves back from screaming.

"So, does that mean that once we reach zero points, we'll always stay there?"

"Did none of you read the post demon-boy made? He explained every single thing you have heard today, including the answer to your question, Hirata-boy, on the first day of school. We perfect existences provided you with all the information you needed. It's your own defective behaviour that led to this." Kouenji had apparently had his fill of this conversation. To be fair, the enjoyment was starting to wane from it, so he went back to filing his nails, completely obsessed with his image again.

"Won't the other classes make fun of us?" Sudou kicked the legs of his desk with a loud thwack. After hearing that the classes were divided based on merit, everyone else would probably believe that Class D was full of morons. Despair wasn't unreasonable.

"Seriously Sudou. Do you believe this class doesn't deserve to be mocked? Even if we had tried to do worse, I don't think it would be possible. Pathetic. What was that word I used on the first day, sensei?"

"I believe you called them all defective, Ayanokouji. Which is exactly how the school has labelled you all. So, get used to it."

The class seemed to have given up resistance at this point, the constant flow of blows against them crushing them beyond recovery. Hirata, Kushida and Karuizawa were especially affected by the news, from what I had seen. At the loss of social and economic status in the school, most of my classmates were upset, but those three seemed to be having serious reactions, beyond what would be expected of them. Interesting. More evidence to support my theory from the first day that they had secrets I could use.

"Now then, I have one more bit of bad news to share with you all." She stuck another sheet of paper up on the board. It listed the names of everyone in class. A number stood next to everyone's name. "Judging from these, I can see that we've quite a few idiots in this class." As her heels clacked against the floor, she glanced at us.

"These are the results of the short test you took a while ago. Your sensei was so happy after your excellent performance. Come on, what in the world did you all study when you were in junior high?"

With the exception of a few high scores, almost everyone tested below a sixty. Even if you ignored Sudou's wonderful score of fourteen points, there was Ike, scoring a little above him at twenty-four points. The average score was sixty-five.

"I'm so glad. If this were an actual test, then seven of you would've had to drop out."

"D-drop out? What do you mean?"

"Oh, what, did I not explain this to you? If you fail on a midterm or final exam in this school, then you have to drop out. If we applied that rule to this test, anyone who scored below thirty-two points would be out. You guys really are stupid, aren't you?"

"Wh-what?!" wailed Ike and the other failures.

There was a red line drawn on the paper, separating the seven people in question from the rest of the class. Among those seven people, Kikuchi had scored highest, with thirty-one points. Anyone with a score equal to or lower than Kikuchi's had failed.

"Hey, don't jerk us around, Sae-chan-sensei! Don't joke about kicking us out!"

"Frankly, I'm also at a loss," the teacher said. "These are the school rules. You should prepare for the worst."

"The teacher's right. There do seem to be a lot of morons here." Kouenji wore a smug grin while he polished his nails, his legs propped on the desk.

"What the hell, Kouenji? You scored below the red line, too! You finished in 14 minutes, theres no way you and Ayanokouji passed"

"Pah. Where exactly are you looking, boy? Look again."

"Huh? Kouenji is...huh?"

Starting from the bottom of the page, Sudou scanned upward, and there he found Kouenji Rokosuke's name. Unbelievably, Kouenji had tied for the top spot with me, scoring one hundred points. That meant we'd been able to solve all of those super difficult problems.

"Impossible." An aura of awe and fear enveloped the classroom. To see the two students who had raced to finish and completed the test in 14 minutes be the only ones to get a perfect score astounded everyone.

"I must congratulate you two, Ayanokouji and Kouenji. I knew you would score well based on your entrance exams, but to think you could score perfectly in 14 minutes is rather absurd. For scoring the highest in the grade, both of you have earned 10,000 points." That meant even Sakayanagi hadn't managed to solve all the hard problems.

"How..." Horikita seemed broken. She had scored a very impressive 90 marks, meaning she had solved one of the hard questions, but to her, being able to do a test that quickly and still get better marks than her, marks she couldn't conceive ever getting herself was so far beyond the realm of reality her brain seemed to refuse to accept it.

"Oh, one more thing. This school, which operates under government supervision, boasts a high rate of advancement into elite education and workforce placement. That is a well-known fact. It's very likely that most of you have chosen a college or future workplace."

"However, nothing comes easy in this world. Mediocre people such as yourselves would have to be naive to think that you could easily get into the college or workplace of your choice." Chiyabashira-sensei's words carried throughout the room.

"In other words, you're saying that if we want to get into the company or college of our choice, we must, at minimum, surpass Class C?" Hirata asked.

"You're wrong. To make your dreams of a bright future come true, your only option is to overtake Class A. This school guarantees nothing for any other students."

"Th-that's...absurd! We didn't hear anything about that!"

A bespectacled student named Yukimura stood up. He'd tied with Horikita for 90 marks, indicating that there were no issues with his academic abilities.

"How disgraceful. There's nothing more pitiful than men losing their cool." As if prompted by Yukimura's words, Kouenji let out a sigh.

"Don't you feel dissatisfied being in Class D, Kouenji? How about you Ayanokouji. Both of you are geniuses you should be in Class A" Yukimura asked.

"Dissatisfied? Why would I feel dissatisfied? I don't understand."

"Because the school says we're so low that we're basically delinquents and failures. We've been told that there's no guarantee whatsoever that we'll advance into higher education or get a job!"

"I'm disappointed Yukimura." I guess I had to step in again. "I had high expectations of you, given your intelligence, but it seems you are just as disappointing as the rest of the class."

"What! How dare you, I scored 90 on that last test, how am I a disappointment. At least I should be in class C, not with defectives!" Oops, Yukimura, that may have been a mistake. Now most of the class hates you too, indicative of their glares, and you can't back up your claims like Kouenji and I did.

"So sad. Intelligent yet blind to your flaws, truly more defective

than most people here. How absurd." This was his limit and apparently, I had crossed it. Yukimura, who was sitting diagonally in front of me, stood up, his chair falling backwards as he did, and launched himself at me. Very slowly.

"Pathetic." I grabbed him as he did so, and pinned him to my desk, holding his arm behind his back. "At least be able to back up your claims before you make them, or risk looking like an idiot. Like now." Releasing him, I threw him back towards his desk, where he tripped over his chair and fell to the ground. A few giggles emanated from the room, but at my glare around, they immediately ceased.

"To think people would laugh at someone for trying to prove themselves worthy. Remember, all of you are defective, none of you are better than each other. Don't throw stones in a glass house would be a good way to phrase the situation." I sat down and ignored the glares people threw my way; I was fairly used to it at this point.

Surprisingly, many of the girls weren't too bothered by what I had said and done. By getting to know them and proving my results they seemed to be accepting my analysis and recognising their defects far more effectively than the boys. Apparently, they trusted me even more after seeing I was right, unlike the boys who had instead increased their stubborn dislike for me. This was a fun experiment into how thick-headed someone can be.

"It looks like your bubbles have been burst. If you had simply understood the harsh reality of the situation from the start, then this long homeroom period might have meant something. Your midterm exams are in three weeks. Please think things over and be careful not to drop out. I have confidence that you can find a way to avoid getting red marks on your report cards. If at all possible, challenge yourself to act in a way befitting a skilled individual."

So, there was a guaranteed way to pass the midterms. It probably had to do with the test we had yesterday, the hint it provided with the difficult questions. Hmm. The trick was to figure out how to get everyone to study to pass. Having someone drop out now could be detrimental to our class points, so until I knew the punishments, it seemed it would be my job to help everyone pass.

Oh well. For now, at least the other classes would be focused on the midterms and wouldn't have time to play with me, so I may as well do something interesting.

But who said I can't play with them instead?

Authors Notes

Yay, may first finally. Had a lot of fun writing this. I figured that

since some people would act better, class D would retain a few points. similarly, the other classes would all have more points than in cannon, since they had almost confirmation on the system.

Fully aware of how bullshit it would be to finish a test at the same time. I'm pretty fast with exams, but even so the time it takes is completely up to chance, whether brain melts for a second or two, or five minutes of uuuuuhhhh. But personally i believe that Kouenji is a match for Ayanokouji. In the tug-of-war on the island exam, although Ayanokouji is famously an inaccurate narrator, i still think Kouenji had the upper hand there. they both are god like but different areas each one will accell slightly more over the other. I dunno, tho, just my thoughts.

Things get even better from here, and longer chapters so I'm pretty proud of myself for that. Working on a couple of SS for this arc, so expect them at the end, and as always, enjoy!

Chapter 9 - Study Groups

After sensei left the entire class burst into glorious, pathetic, self-pitying chaos.

"If we don't get any more points, what I am gonna do? These aren't enough!!"

"I used up all of my points yesterday..."

"Forget about the points. What the hell about this class? Why was I put into Class D?!" Yukimura cried resentfully. A thin layer of sweat covered his forehead.

"Wait, does this mean that we can't get into college now? Why did we even go to this school? Does Sae-chan-sensei hate us or something?"

Everyone was panicking, yelling screaming, shaking their friends, doing everything but using their brains. Despite the looming threat of the midterms approaching, and with 7 people in severe danger, 12 people who passed within 10 marks, a range far too close for comfort, most students ignored that fact and focused solely on their worries about graduation. If any of these students did make it to graduation, they probably wouldn't deserve to be there.

This would have continued till the end of class if Hirata hadn't decided to intervene. Damn you Hirata, I was enjoying this.

"I understand that you're all confused right now, but everyone needs to calm down." Hirata, sensing the classroom tipping toward crisis, stood, and attempted to rein everyone in. "The midterms are coming up, and they need to be our priority. If we work together as a class, I'm sure that everyone can pass."

"Look how badly some people did. I don't want to waste my time helping people that will probably still fail! It's sad, but there's no point helping a lost cause." Yukimura was really stuck up with his self-worth. I admit he was quite intelligent for his age, however he possessed some of the worst physical skills in the class. To have that kind of ego was impressive, and eventually it would come back to haunt him.

"Calm down, you two, okay? I'm sure that the teacher talked to us harshly, so we'd be inspired to do better, right?" That was Kushida. She slipped between the two and separated them, gently taking Yukimura's balled fist. Just as anyone would expect, Yukimura

didn't try to hurt her and reflexively took half a step back. As expected of the class angel, she resolved the dispute immediately.

"Besides, it's only been one month since we started here, right? Like Hirata-kun said, it's better if we all do our best together. Do you think that I'm wrong about that?"

"N-no, it's... Well, I certainly wouldn't say you're wrong, but..."

Yukimura's anger had almost completely vanished. Kushida looked at everyone in class, and it was almost as if her eyes reflected a sincere wish for us to work together. Her control over them was unrivalled. If she asked them to virtually anything, most of the class would follow her without question. In a divided classroom, she would be the key to success.

"Yeah, it's better for us to band together. Right? There's no need for you to fight, Yukimura. Hirata."

"I think we should start by forming study groups." Everyone went silent as Horikita spoke up. For someone who disregarded even the concept of friends to be injecting herself into conversation here was very surprising, and at this moment the floor was hers. "It's the simplest method of helping those with lower grades. Those who got top marks can take groups of 4 or 5 and teach them themselves."

"That's a great suggestion Horikita. If you don't mind leading one of them yourself, then I think we're on a good track. I, Kushida and Yukimura?" he hesitated before receiving a nod and continued, "will also lead a group each for the lowest students. Those who scored above 50, you can form your own if you wish and study together, but for now we will be prioritising those most at risk of failing." Hirata effortlessly transitioned Horikita's idea into a solid plan. He wasn't the class leader for no reason. But I could already predict where this conversation was going, and there was no way I would let it reach the destination Hirata intended.

"Ayanokouji, Kouenji, would you be willing to take a group each as well? You clearly are the smartest in the class, so if you could help that would be a huge benefit." Oh, poor Hirata, you have disturbed a sleeping bear.

"And why should we do such a thing, Hirata-boy? It is true that our academic prowess is unrivalled in our year, but I see no reason for the two of us to lead a study group."

"Unfortunately, I must agree with Kouenji here. There is no benefit that we receive for giving up our personal time to help those failing. Whether they fail or not, I have no interest in helping."

"Ayanokouji, Kouenji, please, if you could help out it would be amazing. I don't wish to see any of my friends leave, and don't you want to help the class? Surely you care about us a little!" Ah,

Kushida was dangerous. Asking for our help whilst indirectly making us enemies to the class if we refused. But that would only work on people who cared for social standing, like her. Those who base their lives and beliefs around one objective cannot ever truly understand people who don't.

"It seems the devil is still pretending to be an angel, despite falling further than any other."

"Wouldn't that make her your master, demon-boy? The two-faced bitch is darker than you can ever be hahaha."

At our claims her face broke into shock horror. As quickly as that happened, she recomposed herself and pouted with a sad face, a couple of tears forming in her eyes.

"Oi, don't call Kushida-chan a devil!" "Don't be mean to Kushida-chan!" "If anyone is a bitch it's you two for not helping!" And the clowns arrive to defend their angel.

"As we have made clear, there is no social obligation for us to help, and you have nothing we want. Your negotiating position is worthless, Hirata. Consider your options before advancing next time." And with that, Kouenji and I withdrew from the conversation for the moment. Although, I wasn't done yet. I had foreseen the outcome of this discussion based on the attitudes of three boys. And it would be much more fun to keep listening.

"I suppose that's your choice then. Well, I guess we should start forming groups then."

"Why do we have to listen to you! I don't need to do anything you say. Maybe I won't study at all, and just cram the night before. It's worked for me so far."

"Yeah, shut up Hirata! We can study on our own."

"We don't need your help!"

Sudou, Ike and Yamauchi all speaking out. While Sudou had stayed away from them to an extent, it seemed it was an inevitability for him to be drawn into their orbit and dragged down.

"Don't bother studying alone. I will personally tutor the three of you." The ice queen Horikita had spoken. Her voice was at a new level of cold, and her gaze was boring into the three of them.

"Oh, now this is fun. Hirata, you wanted my cooperation? I will help Horikita tutor them." I put myself back in the conversation.

"Wait, hold on we never agreed in the first place."

"Yeah, why would we be tutored by you two, you're both horrible."

"I don't think you particularly have a choice. Ike, Yamauchi, Sudou I expect to see you three at the library this afternoon. I will personally drag you to passing if it kills me." She shot me a glare, as if saying, 'why are you involved we will discuss this later'. I suppose

that's fair enough. I had interrupted and inserted myself into her tutoring group, so I may as well make myself useful.

But there was only one outcome for this group of students.

It was inevitable to fall apart.

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won't influence me at all. I just pity you. You must have spent your whole life running from anything that presented a challenge," she said.

"Say whatever you want. Academics will be useless in the future, anyway."

"Academics will be useless in the future? That's an interesting argument. How do you justify that?"

"I don't care if I can't solve this problem. Studying's useless. Aiming to become a pro basketball player will help me a lot more."

"Incorrect. Once you learn to solve these kinds of problems, your entire life will change. In other words, studying increases the possibility that you'll solve the problems you face. It's the same principle as basketball. I wonder if, so far, you've been playing basketball by your own set of rules. When you struggle in basketball, do you run away from it like you do from studying? I doubt you take basketball practice seriously. You're a natural troublemaker, someone who always causes a disruption. If I were your adviser, I wouldn't let you on the team." If I had to pick a side, I would agree with Horikita. Even with incredible natural talent, if the person in question had no ability to learn or improve, they would eventually fail. And ignoring or failing to learn basic maths would only be a detriment to their lives in the future.

"Tch!" Sudou got in close to Horikita and grabbed her by the collar.

"Hey, Sudou. I didn't realise defective also meant moron, but it seems you like to prove me wrong today." It wouldn't do for him to injure Horikita, as I still needed her to tutor him. I would rather no one failed just yet, since we still didn't know how the school would respond, and losing class points in such a simple manner was not interesting at all.

"What did you say!" His attention shifted instantly onto me, releasing Horikita's collar and moving towards me instead.

"Are you dumb or deaf, because I thought I made what I said fairly clear."

"You watch yourself Ayanokouji. Yeah, you might have helped me a couple of times, but don't think I'm gonna ignore your attitude here!"

"You want to play professional basketball? Do you honestly believe you can make such a childish dream come true in this world? A simpleton like you who gives up right away could never hope to go pro. Furthermore, even if you managed to become a professional player, I doubt you'd earn an annual income sufficient to live on. You're a fool to have such unreasonable aspirations."

I'm sure Horikita was thinking exactly the same thing. The words

she had been abusing Sudou with were leading to the same logical conclusion, however I couldn't allow her to be the ones to say them. It was much more fun to have an angry dog attack me, than to go after the person I was trying to push him together with.

"You!" It was clear that Sudou was on the brink of losing control. If he raised his fist, I'd have to wrestle him down.

"So, you're just going to immediately give up on studying or on school in general? Then discard your dreams of playing basketball and spend your days toiling away at a pitiful part-time job."

"Hmph. That's just fine. I'll quit, but it's not because it's difficult. I took a day off from my club activities for this, and it ended up being a complete waste of time. Later!" Sudou said.

"I'm quitting, too. Partly because I can't deal with studying, but mostly because I'm annoyed. You two might be smart, but that doesn't mean you can act like you're better than us." Ike, clearly fed up, threw in the towel as well."

"I'm not sticking around either. You two can go die, for all I care. I don't need your help." Yamauchi, as eloquent as always gave his two cents, and left the library following behind Ike and Yamauchi.

"I seems I was mistaken. Even if I'd helped them avoid failure this time, we would've faced a similar dilemma soon after. We'd have to go through this irritation all over again. Eventually, they'll fail. I finally understand how unproductive this was. I don't have the time for it."

"So that's how you think, then." That was Horikita's ultimate conclusion. If the failing students were expelled, then the class's average test scores would go up, and we wouldn't have to expend any extra effort. It wasn't wrong, on a one dimensional level, but when considering how complex and cruel the school was, for someone as smart as Horikita to think this way was truly disappointing.

"Do you think differently then, Ayanokouji? Please, share your wisdom, I would be willing to accept your input for the moment." Snippy. Calm down Horikita, no need to get so aggressive.

"You really can't see the bigger picture, can you? I thought better of you Horikita, but time and again you prove yourself defective."

"And what are you then? You, and Kouenji for that matter, both got placed in Class D as well. Do you claim to not be defective?"

"An excellent question, but now is not the time. The pressing issue is Sudou, and since you royally messed up, it falls to me to fix your mistakes." While it would be fun to antagonise a person with such convoluted thoughts, I didn't have time for that. Standing up, I moved to leave the library as well, but was blocked by Horikita.

"Where do you think you're going. We haven't finished our

conversation yet."

"Move Horikita. Someone needs to save Sudou, and since you abandoned the task, you asked for, I have to clean up your mess." I brushed past her, and when she tried to grab my wrist, I pulled away. Stop giving me opportunities Horikita, eventually my self-control will crack. But for now, I can't deal with her. Sudou is on a timer, and I need to find him as quick as possible before someone else does and undoes all the work I had put into breaking him.

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he had quite a bit of experience.

Stepping forward he threw a punch at me, much stronger and faster than the one on the first day of school. Probably a combination of his basketball training improving his body even further, and the extra power that comes from blind rage and adrenalin. I let it hit me, twisting my body slightly so that it hit the side of my chest instead of the center. Upon seeing me barely react to it, I saw his face change slightly in shock.

"Huuh?" That was possibly one of the strongest and fastest punches he'd ever thrown. It had hurt as well, but none of that showed on my face or body. Reactions to pain had been trained out of me years ago. To stand there and take a hit from him without seeming to feel anything should terrify even an observer.

After giving him his one hit, I dashed forward, faster than he could recognise, and grabbed his throat with my hand. I held him up for a second, ignoring his flailing arms, before slamming him down onto the ground. I didn't put too much force into it, not wanting to damage him, but enough that he would feel some shock and pain, enough to force him out of a fight he knew he couldn't win.

"What. Are you..." Coughing and wheezing, he tried to get back up. There was no sense of fight left in him, but his willpower continued to impress me. I'd seen trained soldiers lay broken on the ground, fear immobilising them after having such a maneuverer performed on them.

"You need to learn this at some point, better now than never. There will always be someone better than you at something. Be it academics, which is most people, or basketball. There's always a bigger fish Sudou. Which means that if you ever come up against that fish, you have no value. Branch out. Become someone useful. Because how you are currently, you just hurt the class. You're worthless, defective." He grumbled again at that same word, but I continued. "Become someone who's not. Improve your academics, make some friends. So, when that bigger fish comes for them, you can help them out."

I reached out a hand and helped him stand up. If everything went to plan, this would be the last time I had to deal with Sudou myself. And for that to happen I had to weave a small lie.

"I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here. But Horikita asked me to come. For some reason she hasn't given up on you yet. So go ahead, Sudou. Prove her wrong."

"Why would she want me back. She made pretty damn clear that I wasn't worth teaching."

"I have no idea. But whatever you decide will prove one of us

right. Me or Horikita. Are you worthless or do you have some potential?" With that open question I left him to think. Walking back towards the dorms, there were many variables to consider. In the event that he did go back to studying with Horikita, somehow, I would have to convince her to do the same. Because the fact was, she agreed with what I had told him. In truth, the situation was reversed. Horikita had no intention to continue tutoring him.

I had one day to get her to agree. Not only that, but I would need the help of someone to execute the second part of my plan. In particular, someone popular who could help me make contact with other students in my grade. While I could contact most people in my class, those in other classes were out of my reach, especially the leaders, whom I was the most eager to speak with.

Sudou, however, was mostly dealt with. This situation would drive him to Horikita and give him someone who he thought believed in him. Belief was a strong motivator, and once they got through this exam, he would have absolute faith in her. Then, her nature would naturally hold him back from causing a ruckus, preventing his disruptions that would inevitably happen and impact my plans. It would be interesting, but a loose cannon like Sudou couldn't be left untethered.

It would also be incredibly funny to constantly see the two most opposing people together. A pair that could never function well, but I would force to be around each other. Well worth the effort so far.

Yes, everything was progressing rather nicely.

Authors Notes

This was another interesting one. Mostly meh feelings for it but i wrote it so enjoy.

Sorry for the delayed update i fell asleep at uni and completely missed my normal time for uploading. Maybe living off monster alone is not healthy or smth.

Chapter 10 - Obtaining a Pawn

I couldn't get to sleep, so I got up and left. I bought some juice from the lobby's vending machine and headed back for the elevator.

I could see that the elevator had stopped on the seventh floor. Curious, I decided to check out the CCTV, which showed what was happening inside the elevator car. I saw Horikita, still dressed in her school uniform.

While there was no real need to hide, my curiosity on what Horikita, who famously had no friends, would be doing this late at night was insatiable. Perhaps, like me she had wanted a drink, but more likely she had a more private goal in mind.

Hiding myself in the shadows, I followed her for a short distance, however, I instinctively hid again after I turned the corner. Horikita stopped in her tracks. I sensed another person was with her. Taking out my phone, I started to record the situation. On Horikita could prove useful.

"Suzune. I didn't think you'd follow me this far." Ah, so it was Manabu she had a rendezvous with. Logically that should have been my first conclusion since there was no one else in school she could be communicating with, but I had assumed based on his disdain for her character he would ignore her completely.

"Hmph. I'm far different from the useless girl you once knew, nii-san. I came here to catch you." An admirable goal, but something she was incapable of accomplishing. While she cut off other people, she would never be able to reach Manabu's level.

"Catch me, hmm? I heard you were placed in Class D. I suppose nothing has really changed in the last three years. You've always been fixated on following me, and as a result you don't notice your own flaws. Choosing to come to this school was a mistake."

"That's... You're wrong about that. I'll show you. I'll reach Class A right away, then—"

"It's pointless. You will never reach Class A. In fact, your class will fall apart soon enough. Things at this school aren't as simple as you think."

"I will definitely, definitely reach—"

"I told you, it's pointless. You really are a disobedient little sister."

As much as I respected the President, it was disappointing to see

how he failed to understand the relationship between the two of them. If he truly wanted her to change, this was never going to be a successful method, simply because she idolised him. In fact, his attempt was likely doomed from the start. For the person one idolises to tell them not to be like them, to stop emulating them would always fall on deaf ears. The only way to ensure that the follow listens and understands is to have a fall from grace, to become realistic again in their eyes. That was something Manabu, with his innate talent could never do. In Horikita's eyes he would always be the ultimate existence, and he couldn't change that view of him, himself.

He grabbed his younger sister by the wrist—she offered no resistance—and pushed her against the wall. This night was turning out even better than expected. Not only leverage over Horikita but Manabu as well.

"No matter how I try to avoid you, the fact remains that you're my little sister. If people around here learned the truth, I would be humiliated. Leave this school immediately."

"I-I can't do that... I will definitely reach Class A. I'll show you!"

"How incredibly stupid. Do you want to relive the pain of the past?"

"Nii-san, I..."

"You possess neither the abilities nor the qualities needed to reach Class A. Get that through your head."

He moved forward, as if about to act. The situation looked fraught with danger. Resigned to facing Horikita's anger, I leapt out from my hiding space and went after her brother.

Before he knew I was there, I grabbed his right arm, which he was using to pin his sister.

"What? Ayanokouji..." He stared at his arm and slowly turned to me with a sharp gleam in his eye.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun?!" Horikita cried.

"That's enough President, you wouldn't want your sister getting hurt, would you? You do realize the floor here is concrete, right? You might be siblings, but you should know the difference between right and wrong"

"Eavesdropping is not an admirable quality," he said.

"Fine. Then let go."

"That's my line."

We glared at each other in complete silence.

"Stop it, Ayanokouji-kun," said Horikita, her voice strained. I'd never heard her voice like that before.

Reluctantly, I released her brother. Instantly, he tried to backhand me in the face. I instinctively took a step back to avoid it.

For such a lightly built guy, he was a nasty attacker. He then aimed a sharp kick at my unguarded spot.

I could have dodged, but I had no idea how long he intended to fight for, so I decided to end it then and there. Grabbing his ankle as it sped towards me, I pulled him towards me, and off balance.

As he fell towards me, I launched myself forward, slamming my knee into his stomach and forcing him back onto the wall he had just held Horikita against, gasping in pain.

"Stop it Ayanokouji-kun! Leave nii-san alone!" It seemed that Horikita had decided to intervene, by moving in front of Manabu, arms spread protectively. Despite being abused by him only moments ago, she was still willing to defend him. This was beyond ordinary familial love, but devotion. No wonder he was fed up with her attitude.

"Don't worry, we're done."

"Good reflexes. I didn't imagine you could evade my blows so quickly and respond with such force. Have you been taught?" After the attacks stopped, the questions began. Groaning slightly, Manabu got back up to his feet.

"Obviously. Piano and Calligraphy were my favourite pastimes."

"Hahaha, I knew you would be entertaining Ayanokouji. I'm glad you haven't disappointed. Suzune, is he perhaps your friend? I'm honestly surprised."

"He's...not my friend. Just my classmate." Horikita faced her brother fully, as if denying him.

"You continue to confuse independence with solitude. And Ayanokouji, I should warn you to stop causing havoc with Kiryuuin. If you flood another store, the punishment will be more severe than paying back private points." With that final warning he walked past me and disappeared into the night.

With her brother gone, the night was silent once more. Horikita sat up against the wall, her head hanging low. She probably needed time to think. I was about to return to the dorms when Horikita called out to me.

"Did you hear everything? Or was it just a coincidence?"

"Oh. Uh, it was half coincidence, I'd say. I saw you when I bought some juice from the vending machine outside." That was a superfluous answer for a superfluous question. This wasn't what Horikita wanted to know, but I would wait and make her ask it.

"Who are you, Ayanokouji-kun?" There it is, finally.

"What do you mean? I'm just an ordinary high school student just trying to enjoy life." Bullshit and we both know it.

"Enough swimming skills to almost break a world record at 15. Strong and trained enough to keep up with nii-san, and as much as I

don't want to admit it, defeat him. Incredibly perceptive, able to see through the school system on the first day. And smarter than what I considered humanly possible, finishing a test that quickly. So, I ask again, who are you?" Wow. There was a lot there. She really had been focused on my talent, probably finding my existence an affrontment to her superiority complex.

"Horikita, I'm just a student trying to have some fun in a boring world. There's nothing more to it than that."

"As if I'll believe that. You finished that mock test faster than humanly possible and still got full marks. I didn't even understand one of the questions." Admitting someone is better than her. We had reached the precipice of this before, but now the hurdle was passed, and Horikita could accept others being great. If she couldn't consider others as superior to her then she would never consider them a threat, making her a very boring competitor.

"Horikita, I learned that content years ago. There is nothing this school has to teach me that I don't already know. The only thing that interests me is causing some chaos. So don't try and figure me out, don't try to use me, I do what I want for my own reasons. And there is nothing you can do to change that."

"I suppose I have no choice but to respect your stance. It's something you can back up demonstrably, so I must accept it. But I must ask, will you help me get to class A. Because I will get there, even if I have to drag the class all the way with me." So confident. I respect it, but truly she is incapable of such a thing. Although I won't tell her that since she would ignore it. Failure is a much better lesson than words. And I will teach her failure.

"If it interests me, I may provide assistance. In fact, I already have. Sudou, Ike and Yamauchi have agreed to go back to the library for more tutoring tomorrow with you. I communicated with them your desire to help, so you're welcome." A sour look graced her face at my words.

"Why would you do that. There's no point helping deadweight. It would be better to dump them now, before focusing on Class A." I guess I have to explain everything to her now.

"I'm disappointed you can't see the bigger picture Horikita. There are probably very few advantages, certainly. However, it does help prevent a demerit."

"Demerit?"

"Do you really think that the school hasn't considered this? They've deducted points for students arriving late or playing around during class time. Let's say these students are expelled because no one helped them. How many points do you think they'll deduct from us then?"

"That's—" she began.

"Of course, we don't have any proof that's how it works. However, isn't it possible? 100 points? 1,000 points? They might even deduct 10,000 or 100,000 points. If that happens, it'll be very difficult for you to reach Class A."

"We've lost so many points already, the possible risks we could incur are insignificant compared to the gap between the other classes. If we lose the rest of our points here in order to lose dead weight, that seems a fair trade. After all, we can only lose 120. The situation can't get much worse, and without weaknesses in the class we could rise much faster."

"There's no guarantee that'd be the case. There could be penalties we just don't see yet. Do you really think it's okay to take such a dangerous risk? Well. I'm sure that someone as smart as you must have thought about that already. Otherwise, you would never have suggested creating a study group in the first place. You would've just abandoned the failures from the very beginning." Prodding her intelligence should get through to her. Finally, she should recognise the error in her previous logic, and focus on helping the three idiot's pass.

"I can't deny your logic, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll help tutor them to a passable result. But don't talk down on me again like that, or there will be consequences." Ah, I failed. Oh well, there is still one more chance in my plans to make her self-aware, and probably a more impactful moment as well. I hadn't considered a scenario as this into my calculations, so this result was actually a net positive. Losing this chance wasn't a complete loss, as the groundwork had been set for her character to explode.

"If that's all then, I'll be off. Enjoy your juice Ayanokouji-kun. And... good work getting the three idiots back." Saying this, she walked back into the lobby to return to her dorm. There was a hesitation in her speaking. Probably going to say thank you but changing to good work at the last moment, still unable to finally accept me as an equal. Oh, Horikita, your mind is so fun.

I stayed a bit longer alone, finishing my juice and contemplating how to refine the second part of my plan. Despite the chill, the evening was rather invigorating, and the sky was a beautiful mesh of lights. It's times like these that I really am gracious for my freedom. The chance to see the outside world, to see the sky, and just look at it, is an opportunity I never had at the White Room.

As I was about to return to the dorms, I saw someone sneaking out of the stairwell and making their way towards the school. Keeping hidden, for the second time tonight I decided to follow them and find out what they were doing.

It seemed luck was working even more in my favour tonight. The opportunity for information on someone was a situation I could not ignore. Especially when it was about someone I was so interested in.

What business could you possibly have at school right now, Kushida?

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I'd been seen.

After a brief silence, Kushida coldly asked, "What...are you...doing here?"

"I got a little lost. Sorry. My bad, my bad. I'll be going now." Kushida looked straight at me, clearly seeing through my obvious lie. I'd never seen such an intense gaze before.

"Did you hear?" she asked.

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't?" I replied.

"I see..."

Kushida briskly walked down the stairs. She placed her left forearm against the base of my throat, and pushed me up against the wall. Her tone of voice, her actions, everything about her was completely unlike the Kushida I knew. This new Kushida wore a terrifying expression, one that I could almost compare to Horikita's. Everything about this girl was fascinating.

"If you tell anyone what you just heard, I won't forgive you." Her words were ice, and I didn't think they were an idle threat.

"And if I did tell?"

"In that case, I would tell everyone that you raped me," she said.

"That's a false charge, you know."

"That's okay. It wouldn't be false."

Her words had heft and power, leaving me unable to reply. As she spoke, Kushida grabbed my right wrist and slowly opened my hand. She pushed my palm up against her soft breast.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I hurriedly tried to pull away, but she pushed on the back of my hand.

"Your fingerprints are on my clothes. That's evidence of my claim. I'm being serious. Understand?"

"I understand. I really do. So let go of my hand."

"I'm going to leave this uniform in my room without washing it. If you betray me, I'll hand it over to the police."

I glared at Kushida for a while as she kept my hand pressed against her. This was ridiculous, to hold me in place for so long. Obviously she wasn't aware of how fingerprints worked, but I suppose I should speed the situation up. Giving her breast a small squeeze, she instantly released my hand, pushing it away with a look of disgust.

As she stepped away from her, I asked her a question. "Hey, Kushida. Which is the real you?" Of course, I knew the answer, but keeping her on her toes would make the coming confrontation so much more intense.

"That's none of your business."

"I see. Now, you told me what would happen if I told anyone about this, but what if I did so anyway?"

"No one would ever believe you. The genius who cares nothing for his classmates or the angel who is loved by everyone, who is more believable?" That was true, at least it would usually be if not for the phone recording the conversation in my pocket.

"Let me tell you something, while I have the chance. I absolutely despise stuck up selfish guys like you." A harsh assessment, but not necessarily false. It just so happened the person I moulded myself into was based on the few people I had interacted with at the time, Kouenji being prominent among them. "But I do believe that you won't tell anyone, Ayanokouji-kun." Yes, I would keep her secret, but not out of fear of her like she thought.

"I don't see any benefit in telling anyone about this, so I guess your secret is safe."

"That's why I said I believed you. Ayanokouji-kun, you're fundamentally indifferent to other people, aren't you?"

I didn't remember doing anything that would make her think so, but Kushida seemed confident in her assessment.

"It's not an out-of-place judgment. Back on the bus, you didn't show any interest in giving up your seat to the elderly woman."

Ah, so that's what she was talking about. She'd picked up on what was happening that first day. She had understood that I'd no intention of giving up my seat.

"If you believe I'm telling the truth, then you won't spread pointless rumours," I said.

"If you were really so confident, you wouldn't have felt up my breasts."

"Well, that's... I was really flustered. I panicked for a second." Her stern expression melted into one of impatience.

"So, Kushida, would I be right to think of you as the kind of girl who lets guys touch her breasts?"

She kicked my thigh as hard she could. Panicking, I grabbed the railing.

"Hey, watch it! I could've fallen and gotten seriously hurt!"

"I kicked you because you said something stupid!" Kushida snapped, her face flushed from anger.

"Hey, wait a minute."

She still looked furious. Kushida tromped back up the stairs, grabbed her bag, then returned wearing a huge grin.

"Let's head back together," she said brightly.

"Wait, one last thing." Saying this I took my phone out of my pocket and began to play the recording, right from the start. In one instant, her face collapsed into a multitude of emotions: despair, shock, horror, and a few more I couldn't identify.

"What..."

"Oh, this? Perhaps this could be why I wasn't concerned about your threat? Everything you said here tonight is recorded, Kushida. No way out." Anger won out on her face, and it morphed into a terrifying glare.

"You bitch!" She jumped towards me, rather quickly too. Nice reflexes, Kushida. She was obviously more fit than most girls in the grade, and decently strong too, as I had felt when she pinned my neck. But there was no way for her to get the phone from me.

I grabbed her outstretched arm, and twisted it behind her, locking both arms together and forcing her against the wall rather firmly, slowly tightening my hold on her arms. After hearing a grunt of pain, I released her and threw her to the ground, leaving her breathing heavily, leaning against the railing, eyes filled with fear.

I crouched down in front of her and grasped her chin with my hand. There was no resistance from her, as she stared into my true eyes, the darkness fully revealed, boring deep into her soul. There was no chance, no light no salvation available to her, only me. And that realisation had broken her, leaving a scared little girl alone on a rooftop.

"You tried to blackmail me, Kushida. I'm not too appreciative of that. So, what should I do in return?" I posed this question, despite knowing she couldn't respond.

Indeed, Kushida just sat here, hyperventilating, and muttering incoherent words. There was no response she could give in any circumstance, and so she recognised in this situation she had no power. She was completely at my mercy, and that thought broke her.

"Don't worry, I won't reveal your secret. It's much more useful to have you as a tool. It would do no good for people to find out your true nature, just as it would be bad if people found out mine." I pulled her to her feet, standing her up against the railing in front of me.

"In fact, I find you incredibly useful. You are a fascinating existence, Kushida, and so I will protect you. From now on, remember, you are mine." I stepped back to give her some space, and a chance to recover a little in order to answer, to respond in any capacity.

"You... you think I'll help you? You think I'll let you do whatever you want to me?" A brave response. I had to commend this little devil for regaining her resolve so quickly.

"Of course. Because in return I will help you. You want to be loved don't you, Kushida. More than anything. That's why you put on the act, and why you must vent up here, alone, where no one

can hear your true thoughts."

"How..."

"You help me, and I will make the class love you. The whole grade will love you Kushida. Work with me, and the school will be yours." Yes, she would be a fine partner in crime. Her value as a social butterfly was incalculable and keeping her on my side was essential. Now that I had leverage over her, she would do my bidding, but a willing participant would be infinitely more valuable on top. Kushida was an incredible person, and to have her as a pawn would make my planning far easier.

"Why would you do that for me. And what do you want in return!" So bold. To demand answers from someone with your life in their hands, although I had told her I wanted to protect her from exposure, so it was reasonable for her to ask such questions.

"Because you are useful. Tomorrow at lunch, come to the cafeteria with me. I need your assistance with a small matter. And when you need to vent, come to my room and vent to me. I don't care what you say about others, so I'm willing to listen." By monopolizing how she vented, there was no chance that a situation where someone could overhear would happen. This would keep her in my control alone.

"Fine. It's not like I have much of a choice. I'm keeping the fingerprints though. Get too bold, and I don't care what you do I will drag you down with me." An empty threat, but I suppose if the security blanket, or blazer, would calm her it was worth allowing her to keep it.

"Do what you want. But betray me," I once again grabber her face and forced her to see the true depth of my eyes, "and I will destroy you." I left her there, half leaning half collapsed against the railing, and went back to my dorms. Kushida had lots to think about, lots to contemplate and decide, but truly there was no decision to make.

She was mine now. Kushida was a valuable tool, someone who could think for herself, and could control even other classes with her fake angel act. And when I fulfilled my side of the agreement and helped her become loved, she would become my willing helper.

And when I was done with her, or if she ever betrayed me, it would be as simple as posting a single video on the message board in order to crush her. Both of us would go down in mutually assured destruction, burning debris that would scorch the school. But hopefully not. There were more interesting things I could do with her.

Together we would control the class, then the grade, then the school, rising to the top. And unlike Sudou, Horikita and even Manabu when I eventually revealed my evidence of the fight in

return for a favour, she would be my most valuable pawn.

Authors Notes

So i have a few things to address properly in a separate A/N chapter that i will write after i finish this arc. Basically just a few changes to the way I write, and trying to avoid using the Light Novels as such a big crutch from now on.

This chapter was a lot of fun, but i never seemed to get it right, always felt slightly off. Kushida moment just never felt as good as it could have been, but I've been workshoping it for many moons and it never gets to the point I'm happy with it.

But big reveal, Kushida one of the main characters. I've always found her to be severely underdeveloped and wanted to see more of her so im gonna write it myself. I want to see some more development from her, so she will be a big focus in this fic, so enjoy that. There's not enough Kushida love.

As always enjoy reading!

Chapter 11 - Negotiations

When lunchtime came, I jumped to my feet and headed towards the cafeteria, giving a glance to Kushida and signalling her to follow. It would probably be difficult for her to fend off her 'friends' and find an excuse to follow me, but that was her problem not mine. Knowing her, she would figure something out, probably even turning the situation to her favour.

As I walked, I went over the plan one more time in my head. Part two was now in motion. Everything hinged on this going successfully. Even if Part two fails it doesn't particularly matter, but part 1 was essential to the situation playing out as I anticipate it will.

I could have done this without Kushida's help, and even now I could still tell her to leave but having her understand what I did would be beneficial. For her to see how far ahead I could plan, and how I could act perfectly depending on the situation would force her to hesitate any retaliation against me.

And she inevitably would retaliate. Despite her being my most useful pawn, she was also the biggest risk. Her attitude from what I have seen so far would never allow her to serve someone unwillingly. She would do everything in her power and had already made an attempt with the false rape claim, to shut me down. Kushida would continue to gather evidence against me, and I against her, and eventually both of us would drag the other down.

That was a situation I most certainly wanted to avoid, and so there were two objectives to using her. Firstly, to make her fear or at least become wary of me. This would be easily accomplished, partially today, by allowing her to see behind my schemes. That was simple enough.

The second objective was to get her to willingly side with me. This was infinitely harder. The only sure-fire way to have her as a semi-trustworthy pawn was to have her choose to help me. If I had to spend the next three years constantly planning to foil her sabotage, I would expel her at the first opportunity. A loss, but better than three years of worry. Part 2 would put into motion my strategy to have her side with me. I had promised to make her the center of the grade, to make her the most popular person, and that started here. By giving her rewards, and constantly in small ways

helping her out, the benefits of her siding with me would far outweigh any reason to betray me. Only then could I truly trust her.

Or as much as I can trust any person.

Once reaching the cafeteria, I navigated my way through the crowd and finally reached the meal ticket machine. I bought tickets for two portions but didn't line up at the counter. Instead, I went to the side of the vending machine and looked at students perusing the menu.

"What are we doing here, Ayanokouji-kun?" It seemed Kushida had finally joined me, with her perfect angel act turned up to max. Reasonable considering the setting, but personally I found it to be a little irritable.

"Waiting for my target. Did you escape our classmates ok?"

"Yeah, it wasn't hard. I just told them I had to meet some other friends and they waved me off with a smile." A grin formed on her face at this, one that didn't quite match her usual exterior. It seemed the kindness of her friends amused her to no end.

"Good. No need for anyone to get suspicious. Now, come on." Saying this I walked towards the student I had spotted, indicating for Kushida to follow. I collected the two meals, one for each of us and sat down in front of the upperclassman.

"Um, excuse me. Are you an upperclassman?" I asked.

"Hmm? Who are you?" The student regarded us calmly, a look of complete disinterest on his face.

"Are you a second-year student? Third-year?"

"Third-year. Let me guess, you're a first year?"

"I'm Ayanokouji, from Class D. You're also in Class D, aren't you?" At my name his eyes showed some recognition, and his face closed off with caution. It was for this reason I had brought Kushida with me, as it was unlikely a student from upper classes would trust me.

"The infamous secret leaking swindler. Yeah, I'm in Class D, what's that got to do with you?"

Kushida looked at me with surprise, as if asking, "How did you know?"

"Because he's limited to eating the free meals. It's not very tasty, is it?" I asked. He was eating the free vegetable meal set.

"What do you want? You're really irritating." He took his tray and made to stand, but I stopped him.

"I want to ask you something. If you listen, I'll show you my gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

The cafeteria's hustle and bustle drowned out my voice. The students were all engrossed in chatting pleasantly with their friends.

"Do you still have the problems from the midterm test from the

first semester of your first year? Or, if not, do you happen to know someone from your class who does?"

"So, is this how you found out all your info, talking to seniors? Kinda disappointing." A fair assumption given the situation, but also rather insulting. To think I needed help figuring out rather obvious secrets

"It's possible." I wasn't going to correct his assumption. "Back to the point, do you have them."

"Do you even understand what you're asking?" he said.

"It's not particularly strange, is it? I didn't think it was against school rules to study using old test problems."

"Why are you asking me?"

"That's simple. I believed I'd have the highest chance of success if I worked with someone who doesn't have any points. Honestly, that free vegetable meal doesn't look good. Of course, things would be quite different if you actually liked eating the vegetable set. What do you think?"

"How much are you going to pay?"

"Ten thousand points. That's as high as I'll go."

"I don't have the old test problems, but...I know someone who does. If you want him to help you, though, you're going to need to offer at least 30,000 points. If you've got that, you're fine." He was smarter than he looked, recognising his position, and using it to barter up.

"30,000 is far too much for just some tests. It's not essential that I get them, I just wanted them to help out." This was a flimsy lie at best and anyone could see right through it.

"Bullshit. I know you've been scamming third years, some of my classmates lost points to you. You can afford that, so pay up."

"No, but I could always go ask someone else. There are plenty of other seniors I could go to." Of couse this was a bluff. The only ones I had contact with were Manabu, Kiryuuin and Asahina, all of which would ask for a favour in return, and I had no intention of being in debt to any of them.

"And what if I contact everyone in my grade and tell them there's a first year after the tests. We could lock down the price and charge whatever we want." Ok, it seemed his corporate monopoly fantasies had run wild. This conversation was going nowhere, so I nudged Kushida to intervene. This was why I had brought her after all.

"Please, senpai! I don't want any of my classmates to fail. We just want the tests, for a reasonable price~" As she said this, Kushida put on her best pout, and leaned herself forward slightly, showing off her large chest. She clearly knew how to use her body well to get what she wanted.

"Fine. I suppose I can take the price down. 20,00 points, final offer." That was an incredibly cheap price. I had been prepared to pay as much as 100,000 points for the tests, since the price itself was secondary and I had the points to spend. Being able to use the tests themselves was more valuable right now than any number of points.

"Agreed, as long as you throw in the mock exam we took a few weeks ago."

"All right. I'll toss that in, too. I think that your concerns are pointless, though." It seemed he understood what I was after.

"Thank you very much."

After we made our deal, he quickly left. He probably didn't want to be noticed.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun? What you did just now. Was that really okay?" Kushida asked.

"It's no problem. School rules allow point transfers, so there was no violation."

"You might be right, but isn't getting the old test problems cheating?"

"Cheating? I don't think so. If the school didn't allow it, they would have outlined it in the school rules to begin with. Also, I felt more confident after seeing that third-year student. That is to say, it's not unusual for students to barter points like this."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, you don't need to understand. But good job, you played your part perfectly." Kushida had a sour face for a second before flicking back to her normal angel. She couldn't show her true side here, with so many people around.

"That was disgusting, I can't believe you made me do that."

"Don't worry, you won't have to help me like that often. Mostly I'll just want information." That seemed to calm her a bit.

My phone buzzed with a message from the senior. I checked my messages and saw two exam papers, with correct answers filled in. Taking a look, it seemed my suspicions had been correct.

"These will be the same questions on our midterms exam. They reuse them every year."

"How could you know that for sure?" Kushida wasn't convinced, so I suppose it was reasonable to give her proof, especially since she would be betting her results on it.

"You noticed the really difficult problems alongside the simple ones, right?"

"Yeah, I did. The final questions, right? I didn't understand them at all."

"I did some investigating, and I found that those questions were

on the second- and third-year students' tests. In other words, a first-year student generally wouldn't understand how to solve them. Wouldn't it be pointless for the school to purposefully throw us problems we can't solve? Those questions aren't there simply to measure our academic ability. Now, suppose that the problems on the mock test we took were exactly the same as the problems on the old mock test. What would happen?"

"If I'd seen the old test, I would have been able to answer every question," she said. In response to that, I showed her my phone.

"They're the same. Every single word is identical. The test from that year and this year are exactly the same, in every way."

"That's amazing! So, if we show this to everyone in class, that would mean an easy victory! We should show this to all of our other friends, not just Sudou-kun!"

"No, we'll hold off. We won't show it to Sudou and the guys yet."

"Wh-why? You went to all of the trouble of using up points for this!"

"If they learn that the old test questions would be effective, their motivation to study would go up in smoke. We need to be wary of overconfidence. After all, even though the mock tests were identical, it's possible that the questions featured on the midterm this year might not be the same as last year's." These old test papers were insurance.

"Okay, then how will you use them?"

"I won't do anything for our class. Two days before the test, you are going to hand them out to the class, telling them you got the exam from a senpai you know. Then what do you think will happen?"

"That night, everyone will be hunched over their desks, frantically trying to memorize all of the problems!"

"Exactly."

"But why get me to tell them? You're the genius who figured it out. Wouldn't you want this chance to become a leader in class?" She wasn't wrong with the ideas but applying them to my situation was incorrect. I had no interest in standing out this way. Besides, it would benefit me more if she did the task.

"Two reasons. One, they trust you more. I'm still just an annoying smart-alec who causes problems. No one would believe me."

"That's true."

"And two. Didn't I already tell you last night?" She flinched at a reminder of what had transpired. "I promised to make the class love you. This is a sure-fire way to do so. With you giving them tests to help everyone avoid expulsion, there's no one who could ever stand against you." It was true. The second part of making Kushida trust

me was to help her out. That's why this part was so much more important than part 2. As long as I had the tests, Kushida could rise in status by my hand. Promising more situations like this, she would eventually side with me. This midterm exam had come to be an incredibly promising situation.

"Oh. Well, thank you, I guess." Kushida mumbled the last part, probably reluctant to thank her abuser and user. But that sort-of kindness would niggle in her mind forever now.

"That's that then. I'll make copies of these and give them to you to distribute. Good work today, Kushida."

"If that's all, then bye Ayanokouji-kun. See you in class." She gave me her biggest fake grin. It was stunning. No wonder the boys in our class fell in love with her. And for a split second, even I couldn't see through her act, it was so flawless. She waved, but before she could turn to leave, I stopped her.

"Wait, I have one more thing for you to do right now."

□□□

to invite him along, instead of Ichinose, but the main one was he was the easiest to manipulate in Class B, based on my observations. I still didn't have a good read on Ichinose yet, as at times she seemed almost too kind and caring, and at others I had seen and heard her say things that showed her to be extremely cunning. She was an unknown quantity, but Kanzaki I had mostly figured out, especially his pressure point.

The final group to join us was Sakayanagi, and her follower Masumi. I wasn't surprised at her being slightly late, due to the lack of warning and her handicap, but the fact that she brought Masumi at all showed that Sakayanagi did trust her. Despite claiming her to be simply a pawn and treating her terribly from what I had heard from Hashimoto, Sakayanagi clearly valued Masumi very highly. To bring her everywhere, even secret meetings with secret information, either her hold was iron clad over Masumi, or she believed in Masumi's potential, and trusted Masumi to work with her.

I stayed silent until everyone had joined the meeting, aside from simple greetings. Once Sakayanagi had made her way over to us, I finally opened the meeting.

"Thank you for coming everyone."

"Kukuku what could the Infamous Ayanokouji have to offer us about school secrets? I'm sure this will be interesting."

"Fufufu I agree. A personal invitation to learn something from the mysterious man himself, how could I not be intrigued."

"What's wrong with both of you, can't you learn to laugh properly? Also, Ayanokouji, you told me to come alone, yet they both brought companions. Care to explain." It seemed Kanzaki was the one most ready to get down to business, while Ryuuen and Sakayanagi were both busy having fun in their minds.

"To answer your question Kanzaki, I didn't particularly care who came with them, as long as Katsuragi didn't."

"And what could you possibly have against my classmate Ayanokouji. Or have you perhaps decided to ignore such a boring man." Sakayanagi was incredibly perceptive. Or perhaps she had a mindset much like my own. Most likely a bit of both.

"Exactly that Sakayanagi. What I am about to share will influence the classes greatly, and whoever knows it can come out as class leader. Katsuragi is a boring existence. I would much rather have you as the leader of class A to fight against."

"Kukuku I agree, Ayanokouji. Katsuragi is not interesting at all, unlike Sakayanagi." Ryuuen finally gave some proper input. Took him long enough to join the conversation.

"You're all crazy, wanting someone stronger in charge of another class. But why call me here? Anyone could tell you that Ichinose is

the leader of Class B." Thank you Kanzaki for setting up my response. Very helpful.

"But you must hate that, don't you? Sure, she's intelligent, but from what I gather so are you. And living in that happy go lucky fairy tale classroom must be grating on you by now." This was his pressure point. Ichinose was his leader and Kanzaki had to support her. For someone as intelligent as he is, with a more 'ends justify the means' mentality, according to Kushida, he would never fit into Class B like the rest. Pushing on that would get him to move exactly as I wanted. "You take this information, and cement yourself as a central figure of Class B. Much like Katsuragi, Ichinose doesn't seem like a fun opponent. You, on the other hand, seem to be the best Class B can offer."

"Ichinose is our leader." But this response was not convincing to anyone here.

"It must suck to be stuck with that do gooder, Kanzaki. The next three years are gonna suck for you, kukuku." Ryuuen added fuel to the fire, helping my argument.

"Every single one of you is nuts. Why did I even have to come to this, just to see the lunatics who control their classes go on an ego trip." So, this is why Sakayanagi kept Masumi around. She was quite humorous.

"Quite now, Masumi, the grown-ups are talking." Turning back to me she continued. "I see you want an interesting school life. I can understand that. So why call us here?" Sakayanagi finally got the conversation back on track, stopping it from drifting for the third time.

"I have information on the midterm exams. One standard deviation above the average of the class's results will be given as Class Points." I had in fact paid Chiabashira for this information. Why the school used such an obnoxious method of calculating points I didn't know or particularly care about, but what mattered was that it was true.

"Kukuku now that's interesting. So, not only is there a punishment for failure, there's a reward for passing."

"Why tell us this." Kanzaki, ever the suspicious man, making my life so much easier by being so.

"Because it's interesting if everyone knows. Now the results matter. Competition is a lot more fun."

"You called us all the way over here just for that? This could have been said in a message." Masumi decided to complain again.

"Fufufu but isn't this a lot more fun, Masumi? All the true class leaders gathered in one place, sharing secrets and plans. It's enough to make the boring days here worth it." Sakayanagi really had a

distain for the teaching of this school. In fact, it seemed the only thing that interested her was the class competition. Information worth remembering, I could use it at times.

"I also came to offer you all a deal. The questions on the midterms, for 100,000 private points each." There it was. My true purpose of gathering everyone together. Originally, I had intended to keep the 300,000 points myself, but now this provided an even better opportunity.

"That's an absurd amount, Ayanokouji. You can't honestly think anyone here will agree to that, let alone trust what you say." It seemed my reputation as a secret leaker wasn't enough for Kanzaki, which was the correct response to my outrageous offer. A response I had already planned for.

"This information was purchased from a teacher. I guarantee it's correct. Private points can be used for anything, right? Information is one of them."

"And why ask for such a large amount. How much did this information and the exam questions cost you?" Ryuuen had finally taken the situation seriously, the prospect of exchanging private points for virtually guaranteed more Class Points was a deal he was interested in.

"It cost me 150,000 private points. But just in case you still don't believe me I'm willing to back up my claim with 200,000 private points in the event that the tests aren't the same." That should be reason enough for them to trust me. "Now, shall we sign a contract?"

"Ayanokouji, as much as I trust you with this information, I don't see why you would honestly give it to us."

"I would like to hear your pitch as well, Ayanokouji. Convince me this is worth it." Sakayanagi voiced her support to Kanzaki's opinion.

"Kukuku I want an explanation too. Why should I fork over so many points for less than 100 class points?" It seemed they all wanted reasons. I guess I should oblige them. This was the part I had been most excited for. To force the class leaders to dance to my tune was an event worth remembering, even if it was only a small situation.

"All of you should have different reasons. Sakayanagi has no choice. If she doesn't purchase them now, I will go to Katsuragi next. Whoever provides the class with these takes a lead in your competition. To raise the class points and secure better results, will become the leading figure. Even though Sakayanagi will win out inevitably," she smirked at my compliment, wow what a smug girl, "it would be a large hinderence, especially so early on."

"Well put, Ayanokouji. It seems I have no choice but to purchase them now." That laugh again. At least I had secured one of three. The hardest one was done. I had honestly expected Sakayanagi to put up more of a fight, however she caved quite easily, probably recognising the reasoning I gave.

"Kanzaki. You live in a fairy tale. But I'm sure even you can tell that at one mishap for your class everything will fall apart. Ichinose is too kind to take the hard road, and someone needs to do that. If you bring these to the class, you can take that role for yourself, and at least steer the class away from disaster." It was inevitable, and all the leaders here, even Kanzaki had recognised it. In a school of competition, Class B's attitude would be a hinderance, especially when greed came into play. A few losses and all cohesion would become non-existent.

"Fine. You have a point. I guess I agree to your terms. But I must warn you not to judge Ichinose too early. She's much shrewder than first appearances." It seemed I would need to re-evaluate Ichinose. This was impossible without contact, as I had exhausted everything, I could learn without personally speaking to her. Perhaps Kushida could organise an introduction. Ichinose aside, Kanzaki had also agreed to my deal. Two down, the easiest to go.

"Kukuku interesting pitches. But why should I pay up?"

"It's simple Ryuuen. You don't have a choice."

"Care to explain, Ayanokouji?" Ryuuen had suddenly turned dead serious. I suppose what I said sounded like a threat, but really it was just the inevitable outcome of this situation.

"Fufufu it seems Ryuuen is in a corner from having too much fun and not paying attention."

"Gah, you all think too much for me, can you hurry up Sakayanagi" Masumi was apparently so bored she no longer cared to act obedient.

"It seems Sakayanagi understands. Three classes will have the test and answer sheet for the exam. They will get extra class points from studying it. You, in class C can't afford to turn them down. Especially for such a cheap price." 100,000 wasn't that many points for an entire class, really, especially one where most students would have nearly that many individually. I was only making an assumption, but all three of these leaders should have enough to pay up even on their own. Sakayanagi and Ryuuen probably took points from their classmates already anyway, giving them a large amount of points to use.

"Kukuku you are interesting Ayanokouji." It seemed my answer had amused him, his cheerful demeanour returning. "I guess I'll sign your little contract."

After getting the agreement of all three leaders, I pulled out six copies of the contract I had written.

This contract stipulates that 100,000 points will be paid to this account, 0428371934, in the case that the provided exam question and answer papers are identical to those used in the next midterm exams. In the event that they are not, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka of Class D will pay 200,000 points in return to the account below. The payment will be performed immediately after the presentation of each class's results in said exam.

Account: _____

Signed:

_____ _____

All three class leaders filled in their account numbers and signed the contracts, twice each, giving both me and them a copy to keep.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Ayanokouji. I'll be looking forward to crushing you. That goes for you too as well." With that kind remark, Ryuuen and Albert left, walking back towards the dorms. Albert was an interesting individual. He hadn't spoken a word the entire meeting and had done nothing to look intimidating. Why Ryuuen had brought him I had no idea.

"Fufufu this was fun. A pleasure, Ayanokouji. I can't wait to see what fun you do next. Let's go Masumi." And with that the crippled girl with the heart of a lion rose from her bench and slowly walked off, a bored Masumi following closely behind.

"Are you sure this is accurate, Ayanokouji. I'm aware the benefits of this deal are wholly on my side, but that makes me distrust it even more." Kanzaki was an intelligent individual. Even after being provided with a situation where he couldn't lose, he still hesitated. Caution was necessary, but this was in excess. Or perhaps...

"Are you scared of taking control in your class? This is a bold move, to provide the tests, and will directly challenge Ichinose. It isn't something to take lightly, so can you do it?" I presented him with his dilemma. To make a move and take control and risk potentially fracturing the class, or to allow Ichinose to continue to guide the class into danger.

"I will do this, despite the risks. But if this is a scam, or a lie, I won't forgive you. You will become my sole target for the next three years." This is what I had been hoping he was like. Someone in the fairy tale of class B who was aggressive, bold and willing to take risks. To make sacrifices and not be concerned into inaction. Kanzaki would be fun to play with. By building up his position in class myself I could now decide when to collapse it. And all the more fun it would be when I tore him down.

"Good luck Kanzaki. I will be watching to see the results."

As he walked off, I went back over the plan. Everything had been executed successfully so far, going exactly to plan. Everything was in place now, except for two more things. Both of these had to wait until the exam was over, so until then there was nothing more I could do.

I didn't care much for this exam. It wasn't important. The only thing that mattered now was Kanzaki and Sakayanagi cementing their places in class. That was my overall goal, and I had done everything I could to set that into motion.

Authors Notes

Ok I've been really hyped for this part, its what I've been waiting for the whole time. When i came up with the concept for this fic, there were five main scenes that I had in mind, almost completely imagined out without even planning most of the rest. One of them was Ayanokouji's actions on the first day, and this was another one, in particular the very first scene I considered when planning the fic. So excited to finally publish it and I'm very happy with how it came out.

As always I hope you enjoyed. 2 chapters and 2 side stories left in this arc, and arc 2 is already in the works so hype. May be a bit late when starting the second arc, no idea yet because i want to write ahead a bit and uni is getting hectic, but that's a week away for now so we shall see.

Chapter 12 - Midterms

It was Wednesday. Two days before the midterms. Class had ended for the day, Chiyabashira had left, and most of the class had gotten up to leave.

"Can I have everyone's attention please!" Kushida had gone up to the podium at the front of the room. Everyone quietened down at her voice, and even Kouenji stopped packing up to leave.

The class had improved drastically the last few weeks regarding their behaviour and effort. Everyone was doing thir best to pay attention and not get distracted. Sudou hadn't fallen asleep in class once, none of the girls had been texting and even Kouenji had been taking notes, although he still refused to answer questions most of the time. Everyone seemed to be taking the class points seriously.

"Before you go, I'd like to hand out this exam. It's the one they used last year. I got it from a senpai I know and apparently the questions are usually almost the same. I've got a copy here for everyone, so study it hard, alright!" She held the class in her thrall as she spoke, the attention of everyone completely on her.

"Kushida-chan is the best!" "Go go Kushida-chan" "Isn't it great that Kikyou is here to help!"

Only one person was outwardly sceptical.

"Are you sure about this Kushida-san? You're asking everyone to stop their normal study and gamble on these test papers. It's a big risk, especially if you're wrong." Horikita decided to voice her concerns. It was a reasonable complaint, one I would have made myself if I had not been involved in the situation, and I could see the perceptive people in the class: Matsushita, Yukimura and Hirata all looking serious.

Unfortunately, the loyal defects decided to become the loud majority and defend their precious angel.

"Don't doubt Kushida-chan!" "I believe her, Kushida-chan would never lie to us!" "You should trust Kushida-chan, she's doing more to help than you."

That last complaint was especially harsh. Kushida had a faily easy group to tutor and getting the exams had been all my work. Meanwhile, Horikita had been single-handedly managing Sudou, Ike and Yamauchi all at once, a feat I didn't believe anyone else in

the class could do. Her determination was respectable, so to hurl these insults at her was unnecessarily cruel after the hard work Horikita had put in.

Fortunately for her, Kushida decided to step in.

"That's fair enough, Horikita-san. It's hard to trust that the exam got leaked. I trust my senpai who shared these, but even if they're wrong, all the questions are on the right material so there's no harm in going over it anyway." I hadn't coached this at all from Kushida, so it was something she had recognised herself from looking them over. Once again, she proved just how smart she actually was, when not pretending to be a normal student and friend to all.

"Fine. I suppose it couldn't hurt." With Horikitas concession, Kushida started passing around the exam papers to everyone in the room. However, before she could pass one to Kouenji, he had already packed up and moved to leave the room.

"Wait, Kouenji-kun. You haven't got one yet." A futile but kind gesture from Kushida

"Ahaha do not bother me with such trivialities. I stuck around hoping to see something interesting, but in the end it was just the hand of god at work, nothing new." He smirked at this, as if it was the funniest joke in the world. For the two others who understood it, it could be considered humorous, but most of the class sat in befuddlement. "I, nor demon-boy require such a cheat sheet. Ayano-boy, this test should be harder. Let's have a proper competition this time. I think the results will be much more interesting."

"Don't worry Kouenji, I'll be sure to entertain you this exam. It's going to be quite the spectacle." And hearing that response, Kouenji left the room laughing loudly to himself.

"So you won't take one either, Ayanokouji-kun?" Kushida already knew my response, but simply asked out of consideration.

"No, I have no need of it. In a competition there is no benefit to cheating, and after all the problems are probably just as easy." A few mutters filled the room, but there wasn't much response. My answer had been fair and justified by my recent results on the last exam. My classmates may not like it, but they couldn't object to my attitude since I had demonstrably backed it up.

"Why does he call you that?" Horikita had finally become curious enough about my connection with Kouenji to ask, something no one else had been brave enough to do yet.

"Call me what?"

"'Demon-boy'. It's a strange nickname, and I can't figure how he picked it." That's because he didn't.

"It was given to me in my childhood. That's how he learned it. I was a bit of a troublemaker." Troublemaker was the wrong word,

but there was no way I would explain to her what my childhood had really been like.

"So, you are childhood friends then?" A reasonable conclusion to take from that.

"I suppose you could see it that way."

"What a vague response. One day I will get a proper answer out of you."

"Perhaps. But not today." I would not answer any of her questions today. The plan had gone splendidly and Kouenji had agreed to another competition, of which it was highly likely we would draw as per usual. It was a good day today. The midterms were in two days and then everything would come together, just as I had foreseen.

The only way to make this day even better was some ice cream.

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"Yeah!" Ike howled along with our classmates."

Before long, everyone had their test papers. On the teacher's signal, everyone began. I held off on starting and looked around at the others. The class looked supremely confident. Obviously, they had been cramming the questions on the exam for the last two days. Even Horikita had a faint smile on her face, probably pleased that they were right, and that her students would pass the exam.

Instead of her ordinary tutoring, she had taken Ike, Yamauchi and Sudou through every single question on the old exams and ensured they had completely memorised them. Accounting for their incredible stupidity it wouldn't surprise me if they scored almost an average of 50 each.

Taking my time, I went through and answered every single question. There weren't any challenging ones yet, and I suspect the same was for Kouenji. It seemed the test would come down to who was able to pick up small details, and that would result in a draw.

Sigh. It would have been nice to beat him here, but I couldn't have everything.

The second and third period exams were for Japanese and chemistry, respectively. While I worked, I discovered something else that intrigued me. Looking over the problems again, I realized that what Horikita had drilled into the study group was consistent with what was on the test. She'd been able to accurately predict what problems would appear just from the lessons. The silent girl beside me was even more impressive than I'd imagined.

Then came fourth period. Mathematics. All of the abnormally difficult questions that had been featured on the mock test also appeared here, but the content was the same as the old exams. Even if Sudou and the other guys couldn't understand the problems, they could still apply the answers if they'd memorized them.

Then came the break.

The entire class was celebrating their easy pass on the exam. And rightfully so, they had put in the work in the weeks leading up to today and done the best they could. Passing this exam was a reward they deserved. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be allowing that to happen.

"An easy victory! We've got this test on lock!"

"I feel like I might get 120 points." Ike sounded pretty sure of himself. Yamauchi must have felt the same, judging from the smile on his face. Confident, they looked over the old test papers for a final review."

"Yeah! Thanks to Kushida-chan, this test is a breeze!" The rest of the class started offering up some support. This was a mistake in my opinion. The worst thing someone can do before an exam is relax

and celebrate early. There was every chance they could still bomb out and fail and celebrating would only reduce their focus for the next one.

The break passed in the blink of an eye, and the English exam began. Arguably the hardest for everyone, where even knowing the answers, it could still be challenging, there was every chance someone could fail.

Finally, the exam was over, and with that the midterms were completed. The whole class took the time to celebrate, relax and talk, something they hadn't been able to do for the last few hours.

"Congratulations everyone. We all studied hard, and it paid off. I'm sure we'll get more class points next month from this." Hirata, as one of the central figures in Class D took the time to stand up and congratulate everyone.

"Good job everyone! I'm sure you all did amazing!" Kushida wasn't one to let such an opportunity go to waste, and piggy-backed off Hirata's momentum to congratulate the class as well.

At the praise of the two class leaders, everyone seemed to completely relax, letting go of any last niggling doubts or worries. Meanwhile I took the opportunity to leave the room unnoticed and catch up to Chiyabashira who was just outside.

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them again next exam."

"Quite. However, you weren't completely successful. Sudou will almost certainly fail." I dropped that bombshell on her. Unsurprisingly she hadn't expected me to say that and was stuck with an open mouth for a few seconds.

"What are you talking about? He knew all the material. And he didn't seem to have any problems in the exam, I was watching all three of them." Horikita was in disbelief at my statement.

"Still, he's going to fail. I commend your efforts but in the end it wasn't enough." This was a cruel way for me to tell her, yet it was also the most effective. By bluntly throwing her failures in her face, Horikita would be forced to recognise them.

"You don't know that. You can't say that for sure until the results come out."

"Believe what you want."

Horikita didn't respond to this. During her silence our drinks and cake were delivered, and while I dug into mine, hers went untouched as she thought.

For someone as proud as her, this insistence on her failure was something she couldn't accept. I had started this back on the night I encountered her and Manabu. To force Horikita to accept her flaws, to recognise that there were important values besides intelligence.

"Why do you care Horikita? To you, he's a lesser human." I finally continued the conversation from that night. It was time to force her to understand, because apparently, she was incapable of reaching the conclusion on her own.

"I don't what the class to lose points. That's it. Avoiding possible demerits, like you said." She quoted what I had fed to her word for word. Clearly, she hadn't thought about the situation at all since then. Or at least hadn't made any progress in her conclusion.

"Wrong. Guess again"

"What do you want me to say. He doesn't contribute to the class. He's worse than useless. The only benefit to not having him drop out is that it harms the class less that way, and even that could turn out to be wrong."

"Think, Horikita. This is a school for the elites. So how did he get admitted despite his low scores. Obviously, the look for things besides intelligence. You value it so highly, yet who said that the school did as well."

"But.. that's just logical." She didn't want to accept that.

"Says who? What would happen if there was a competition where fitness was involved? Sudou would far outclass you in usefulness. In a conversation? Even Ike holds more value than you. In fact, you would end up being a detriment. Your blinkered concept of what

makes someone better than others is flawed Horikita. You need to accept that."

Once again, she fell silent, and I let her think. It was a harsh reality I thrust upon her, and it wasn't something she would be able to accept instantly.

"I... get what you're saying. Everyone has a merit, and so it's worth helping them so they can help you."

"These classes aren't individuals, Horikita. We get measured together; we compete together. You can't reach the top without the class. You can't let Sudou be expelled for your pride."

Hopefully she would recognise this now. I honestly couldn't care to expend any more effort into convincing her. If she didn't learn her lesson now, it would turn out I had misjudged Horikita. I had hoped to help her change. From day one I recognised her intelligence, her cold calculating attitude. As a competitor, as a leader she would be a joy to watch. But if she never came out of her shell, and if my prodding now didn't help, then I would give up on her.

Horikita wasn't worth any more effort than I had already expended.

"Let's change the topic. I wanted your opinion on something sensei said, Horikita." An instant shift of topic, away from what I was saying on the surface but still deeply connected to my last sentence. Subconsciously she should make the connection, or I would have to use a different, less desirable plan. "Remember what she said on the first day? 'You can buy anything with private points'. I wonder how far that goes. Could I buy a bigger dorm? Could I buy my way into another class? Could I buy a life? It's an interesting concept."

"I hadn't thought about it much, but now that you mention it, it is a strange way to phrase the information. Perhaps it was a hint of some kind." There we go, on the right track. Come on, Horikita, keep going.

"Most people focused on food and clothes and other things you normally buy, but sensei stressed the word **anything** didn't she. Maybe she really meant that. I wonder..." something had clicked but I had no idea what.

"Wonder what?"

"No, it's nothing. I feel stupid for not realising this earlier. I bet every other class has already been figuring it out." She wasn't wrong there. Ryuuen had been committing small crimes and paying them off. There had been a rumour that Sakayanagi had purchased a longer lunch one day, and even Ichinose was often seen with a teacher asking questions about strange things. Only Class D had

done no investigation, no testing or made any attempt to figure out more about the system.

"Well, if you do get curious, here. These could be handy." I transferred her 100,000 points. "Use them to do some experiments maybe. Save them for a rainy day, to turn a situation around. I don't know, figure something out."

"Where did you get this kind of money, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Here and there. In return, Horikita, I ask one thing."

"Pervert."

"I didn't even ask yet, and you already jump to conclusions. No, what I want is to see something interesting. Something amazing. Show me something fun with those points, Horikita. Make them worthwhile."

With that I turned and left the café, and Horikita, who remained sitting there in silence. Her brain must be overloaded with how much information I dumped into it, but there was nothing left for me to do.

Everything was complete. My preparations had paid off, and the plan had been set in motion. Unfortunately, it hinged on said girls' ability to break out of her shell, something her brother had failed to accomplish with her for years. It was a rushed job, but I had nothing left.

Everything relied on Horikita now.

Authors Notes:

Shorter chapter than the last few, but the next one is a banger so hopefully makes up for it. Felt pretty good with this one, it felt comfortable to write and overall was satisfied.

On another note, huge props to the smart authors, either fanfiction or pubish themselves. It's kinda nutty that people can think up super intricate plans and shit when they write, and having to do the same has given such a huge amount of respect to them from me. It's not easy to do, so kudos to everyone who even tries, and to those who make genius plans in their writing, ultimate gods.

Anyway, as usual hope you enjoyed, see you in two days for the final chapter!

Chapter 13 - Results

Chabashira strode into the classroom, to find a room full of students sitting silently and nervous.

"Well, this is very unlike Class D. What could possibly have brought about such concern?" A cruel question when she was holding the very thing to be concerned about.

"Sensei, it's been a week. You told us that our results on the midterms would be released today. It's the last lesson of the day so I'm sure you can understand why we're nervous" A very Hirata-like response, keeping the situation calm.

"There's no need for you to worry, Hirata. You should have passed quite easily."

"So, when will the results be released?"

"Well, if you'd like, now is as good a time as any. If we waited to do it after class, we wouldn't have enough time for other procedures."

Some of the students visibly reacted to the words "other procedures."

"What...do you mean by that?"

"Don't get flustered. I'll tell you now."

As usual, she revealed the details simultaneously and collectively. She stuck a large, white sheet of paper with everyone's names and test scores onto the blackboard.

"Honestly, I'm impressed. I didn't think that you'd score so well. Many students tied with perfect scores in mathematics, Japanese, and social studies. More than ten of you, actually."

"Some of the students shouted in joy and delight when they saw the 100s lined up on the results sheet. However, some weren't smiling. The only grade that truly mattered was Sudou's score in English.

Then—

We saw Sudou's test scores. He had scored sixty points in four of the five main subjects, which was considerably high. He'd also scored 41 in English.

Horikita turned to me with a smug smile, and an I-told-you-so face, apparently convinced by this that Sudou had passed. However, before she could say anything-

"Wait, sensei there's a mistake." Yukimura made a comment about

the results.

"Yeah, how come Ayanokouji and Kouenji both got 101. There's an error." The whole class noticed this, and an uproar rose. None of them could understand how we managed it.

"They must have cheated!" "How can cheating get you an extra point!" "Then how else did they do it!"

The whole class was baffled by this, throwing wild accusation. Horikita sat in her seat silently, staring at me, as did Matsushita and Kushida

"Ahaha another draw then, demon-boy. Though I'm not particularly surprised, it was rather obvious. I expected two perfect existences to figure it out easily. Though I do wonder what else you did, hmm?"

"Yes, I did expect this outcome. At least you didn't disappoint and miss it or commit unnecessary resources to try and beat me. I'm glad you recognised that as pointless."

While the rest of the class tried to figure out what we were talking about, Kouenji and I congratulated each other. It would have been extremely disappointing if one of us hadn't tried this, losing in such a simple manner would be a tragedy. Likewise, trying too hard to win by buying more points would also be a mistake. There was no point after the first purchase, and any more would be a waste of points. Instead of winning our competition it would be a mark of shame from trying too hard.

"Ayanokouji-kun, could you explain what happened. How did you score 101%, even with all the 'extra studying' we did?" Hirata gave it his best shot at extracting information out of me, but it wasn't time yet. Soon though, the class would hopefully know.

"Eh, I don't feel like telling anyone. I'm sure it will be explained sooner or later, so I wouldn't worry about it" A lacklustre and dismissive response got the class back at me an Kouenji again, however before it could continue any further Chabashira interrupted.

"Quiet down now. Ayanokouji and Kouenji both scored 101% on this exam legitimately and fairly, there was no misconduct involved. Now, I would like to show you another thing." She turned on the overhead projector on, shining the whiteboard with a ranking. This was another piece of information I had purchased from her; one I didn't share with anyone. It was the final piece of prompting I required, and so to put the final piece of my plan into motion I sent one last message.

"This is a ranking of every student in the grade who scored 100 or higher. Congratulations Ayanokouji and Kouenji, no Class D student has ever come in the top of an exam ranking in the history of the

school."

Everyone looked at the results, showing the top 17 students in the grade. Below Kouenji and I, there were eight other students, all of them scoring 100 on the exam. Most probably used the papers I purchased, but I had a hunch Sakayanagi hadn't even looked at them. She was incredibly intelligent, and most likely used it as a chance to flex her superiority over the class. She was on the list with 100, yet Katsuragi was not. An interesting development.

As everyone watched however, her score changed, and she jumped from 100 to third place with 101.

"Wait what!" "How did she do that!" "Her score changed!" "Did she figure out what they did!?"

Good job Sakayanagi. You played your part perfectly, and in return Class A should almost completely be yours now. It will probably only take one more push to bring Katsuragi down completely.

"Ayanokouji-kun what did you do. It would be fine if only our class knew, but now Sakayanagi does too, so it's a threat. Tell me now." Horikita had finally broken her silence, demanding an answer, but I wouldn't give her one.

"That's not fun, Horikita. Besides, sensei hasn't finished her announcement yet. Sudou still has to fail." I whispered that last part to her. It wouldn't do for the class to grow suspicious of me, so no one could know I had done anything.

"Yes, you all did a marvellous job. However—"

Chabashira held a red pen in her hand.

Sudou unintentionally let out a "Huh?"

She drew a red line right above Sudou's name.

"Wh-what is that? What does that mean?"

"You failed, Sudou."

"Huh? You're lying, right? Don't give me that crap! Why did I fail?" he cried.

Of course, Sudou was the first one to protest this. In response to Sudou's failing grade, the entire classroom did a complete one-eighty. We stopped our delighted cheering and erupted in confusion.

"Sudou, you failed the English exam. That's all."

"Don't screw with me! I got thirty-two points! I passed!"

"When did anyone say that thirty-two points was a passing grade?"

"No, no. You said so, sensei! Right, everyone?" shouted Ike.

"Say whatever you want, it won't matter. This is the undeniable truth. You had to score at least fourty-two to pass the midterm exam. In other words, you were just one point short. You were so

close."

"F-forty-two?! You never told us about this! I won't accept it!"

"Should I tell you how we determine the passing grade?"

This was it. Horikita had turned to me, staring me dead on with her cold eyes. "What did you do?"

"Had some fun"

"He's going to be expelled because you wanted fun? You're insane, Ayanokouji-kun" Horikita obviously disapproved.

"So do something then. Stop it. Make my day even better." Here we go, Horikita. Prove your worth.

Chabashira wrote a simple formula on the blackboard: 83.6 divided by 2 equals 41.8.

"We set a passing grade for each individual class, just as we did for the last test. We calculated that number by dividing the average score by two. That's how we arrived at our answer."

In other words, anything at 41.8 or lower was considered failing.

"I provided proof that you failed. That is all."

"No way... So... Does that mean I'm going to be expelled?"

"Although your time here was short, you struggled valiantly. You'll be asked to fill out a withdrawal form after class, but you will need to have a legal guardian present when you do so. I'll contact them for you."

As we witnessed the scene unfold, the teacher rattling off the information as if she were casually giving a report, we finally realized that this was actually happening.

"As for the rest of you, good work. You all passed without any issues. Work hard so that you can pass your final exam as well. Well then, next—"

"S-sensei. Is Sudou-kun really being expelled? Is there no way to save him?"

Hirata was the first to show concern, even though Sudou hated him and had lashed out at him verbally.

"He's being expelled. He got a failing grade."

Chabashira had heartlessly announced Sudou's expulsion without offering him a second chance or the faintest bit of sympathy. Ike and Yamauchi, knowing that words of comfort would probably have the opposite effect, stayed silent. Hirata remained quiet, too. Sadly, some of the students appeared relieved by this. Were they happy that a nuisance like Sudou was being removed from the class?

"Sudou, come to the faculty room after class. That is all."

"Sensei. May I have a moment of your time?"

Horikita had finally interrupted. She'd been thinking this entire time, concentrating so hard her brow was furrowed, an unusual sight for her. Please have figured it out, I'd rather not step in

myself.

"Well, this is unusual, Horikita. Why?"

"Earlier, you said that the previous test had a passing grade of thirty-two points. You arrived at that number by the same formula you showed us today. Were there no mistakes in calculating the passing grade for the last test?"

No, no, no that's not it. Damn it Horikita.

"There were no mistakes."

"Then, that raises one more question. I'd calculated the average score for the previous test to be 64.4 points. If I were to divide that by two, I would get 32.2 points. In other words, higher than 32 points. Despite that, the passing grade was set at 32. That means that you left off the decimal. That contradicts what you did this time."

"Th-that's right. If you follow what you did last time, the passing grade for the midterm should be 41 points!"

In other words, Sudou's overall grade should have meant that he just barely passed.

"I see. So that's what you think. Unfortunately, it's incorrect Horikita. I'll explain in more detail. Your calculation is off. We didn't simply omit the decimal when we calculated the passing grade. We rounded the numbers up or down. On the last test, we rounded down to 32 points, and on this, we rounded up to 42. There's your answer."

"Tch..."

"You should have noticed that we rounded the numbers, but to hold on to that possibility... Well, too bad. At any rate, first period will be starting soon. I'll be going."

Well, I guess my efforts hadn't paid off. It was time to deal with the situation myself.

Except-

"Wait. One last option sensei."

"What is it Horikita? What could you possibly be suggesting now?"

"Ayanokouji-kun and Kouenji-kun both scored higher than possible in the test. Similarly, Sakayanaki-san's score changed now, days after taking the test. Which leads me to think of one possibility."

"Oh? And what could that be?"

The entire classroom sat in silence. Everyone was completely focused on the battle between Horikita and Chabashira. Even Kouenji sat in silence, although he had a large smirk on his face and kept throwing looks my way.

Kushida also sent me a look, along with a message. It confimed

what I had been expecting, and I replied with some final instructions. Today had gone perfectly, if one more sentence was spoken.

"Sensei. You said it on the first day, right? 'Anything can be purchased with private points'. So please sell me one point to add to Sudou's test score."

There it is.

The entire class erupted into chaos. People shouting, screaming. People denying it was possible, that she was insane, crazy to try something so stupid, of course you couldn't buy test points.

"Ahahaha you truly are a fascinating student Horikita. To figure out what was going on I must commend you. Yes, I can in fact sell you one point. The question is, do you have enough private points to afford it?"

"How much sensei?"

"Hmm, let's see. I'll give you the same price tag Ayanokouji and Kouenji got. 100,000 for one point."

The class went insane at this. There was no restraint left. Students shouted at each other, the smartest of the class frozen in shock that they hadn't even considered such an idea, that they had missed such an obvious hint.

"That's unfair sensei." Hirata had recomposed himself enough to object to the ridiculously high cost.

"Don't worry Hirata, I can afford it." Passing her student ID to Chabashira, the points were transferred.

"Well, that's that."

"So Sudou's expulsion is cancelled then?" Horikita still didn't quite believe the situation was possible.

"You paid the price I set. Sudou's new score is 42. A pass. He is still a student at ANHS. What more do you want me to say?" Chabashira summed up the situation nicely. Packing up her things she moved to leave the room. "One last thing. This was the only exam you can purchase test points. Don't expect such salvation to occur again." And then she was gone.

"Thank you Horikita. You really saved me."

"Yeah, thanks for saving Ken, Horikita-san. That was really smart" Ike decided to also thank the person who had saved his friend.

After that the compliments started pouring in, to which Horikita was looking extremely uncomfortable. Seeing this, I nodded to Kushida.

"Wait, Ayanokouji-kun, you also paid 100,000 points then? Where did you get them from? No one should have that many?" Good work Kushida. If she had asked Horikita it was likely that the attention would be pushed off her to me, by Horikita herself and

that was not what I wanted.

"Yeah, shouldn't you have saved them! You could have saved Ken yourself instead of Horikita having to!" Yamauchi decided for once in his life to have a brain. Incredible timing.

The rest of the class started to hurl insults at me for my selfish behaviour. Surprisingly no one mentioned Horikita also having so many points, or wilfully ignored it in favour of targeting me.

"I was confident someone else would figure it out. Besides, it was fun to watch." The classes responses mostly stopped after that, faces turning into disgust.

"That's not funny Ayanokouji-kun. The suffering of a classmate isn't fun, I hope I never hear you say that again." Cold Hirata huh. That was interesting. It seemed he would go to great lengths to protect his classmates from any threat. This was something I would have to investigate further. Probably by endangering someone here.

"Don't worry. If Horikita hadn't figured it out I would have said something." That seemed to placate any remaining questions. Kushida had spun the ball well, and all suspicions were mostly gone. There was just one final task for her to do.

Walking to the front of the room, it was a repeat of the day she handed out the exam papers.

"Everyone can I have your attention again!" The class quieted down to listen to their angel, except Kouenji who had left at some point in the commotion. He could move like a ghost when he wanted to.

Kushida looked downwards, fingers fidgeting together a bit, the perfect resemblance of guilt.

"I... have to confess. I betrayed the class."

"WHAT!" "KUSHIDA-CHAN NO!" "I don't believe it!" "Kikyou would never!"

"No no stop it's true, I'm sorry." A few tears formed in her eyes as they tried to defend her, but she blew them off, and admitted the truth.

Many of the boys in the class fell back into their seats, broken. They couldn't believe their idol had betrayed them, probably still denying it in their minds. Similarly, the girls all looked shocked, never expecting this sort of thing.

"Kushida-san, please explain what you mean. It might be hard, but if you did betray us in any way, we have a right to know." Hirata came in as the voice of reason, the sole person still capable of acting rationally.

"Well... sorry, its hard. I didn't want to lie, but I can't keep it in anymore. I sold the tests to the other three classes."

"WHAAT!"

Once again, the class was shattered at hearing such news. Some boys were crying, some were chanting her name over and over again. The girls weren't as extreme, but the leading members of the girls were looking angry. Specifically, Karuizawa and Shinohara.

"Explain Kushida. Why did you do it." Cold Hirata was back. Apparently, betrayal was also enough to get on his bad side.

"Well. I didn't want my friends in the other classes to fail. And I also wanted to get some points for the rest of us as well. It's been hard living on so few points, so I figured a few more couldn't hurt."

"How much did you make."

"I sold the exams to each class for 100,000 private points each. I was going to share them with everyone, but I just felt so guilty!" At her final claim she broke down in tears. Instantly, the whole class seemed to have simultaneously forgiven her and moved into comfort mode.

"Don't worry Kushida-chan it's not your fault!" "You did good Kikyou, more points is great!" "That's not betraying us that's helping!"

A constant stream of compliments and condolences flew towards her, a teary smile forming on the little angels face once again.

"Thank you, guys! It really means a lot to have you support me. I got 300,000 points for that, so I thought everyone could have 7,000 each and we could go celebrate passing together!"

Yeah! The whole class cheered at that. For people who moments ago were condemning and attacking her, they had made an incredibly switch. The entire class was now on her side, fully supportive of her plan. Kushida was a hero to them all.

"What about the other 30,000."

Oh, Horikita, you had one job. Stop falling into the traps I create.

"Wh-what do you mean Horikita?" A teary Kushida tried to keep her image together under a hash question from Horikita.

"7,000 points to everyone leaves 30,000 remaining. I assume you keep the rest?"

If she hadn't asked that question everything would be fine. However, I had expected it and given Kushida a response to use.

"Well... I also told another lie. I didn't get the exams from a senpai friend. I had to buy it with points. I didn't have enough so I had to borrow some, and I was going to pay off the debt with them." She sheepishly looked at her hands, avoiding eye contact.

"Don't worry Kushida, you can keep the money. I'm sure no one here will hold it against you." Hirata settled the debate then and there. All the girls in the class sided with him and none of the boys had any interest in debating against Kushida, thowing pointed glares to Horikita. Kushida became the centre of attention in the

class, humbly accepting the thanks and consolation of everyone around her.

Horikita was sitting quietly in her chair, ignored by the class, and keeping to herself. I suppose she wanted an explanation, and if she asked for one, I would tell her, but I wouldn't be going out of my way to explain. Leaving her sitting there, I packed up and made my way out of the class, catching Kushida's eye on the way out and giving a single nod good work.

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Masumi was staring at me, possibly waiting for an explanation, but before she could speak, either to complain again about my laugh or to ask for answers I received a message on my phone.

No, not a message. A points transfer, from Ayanokouji. He had sent 100,000 private points to me, along with a message.

'Take control of your class'

Fufufu oh you are fun, Ayanokouji. To sacrifice that many points just to have me take the reins, he was a bold man to do so. Obviously, he wanted an interesting fight, so who am I to deny him.

I sent the 100,000 points per the contract for the exam papers to the number specified on the contract which, interestingly enough wasn't Ayanokouji's. I wonder what he was planning. However, before I could make my move Katsuragi stood up and directly questioned Mashima-sensei.

"Mashima-sensei, could you explain these results. How is it possible for two Class D students to score above us, let alone get over 100%?" Despite his intelligence, the prejudice of the school against class D had affected his mind already. Disappointing. Class D was obviously the most dangerous, especially with Ayanokouji, yet he bought into the elite class A nonsense so easily. We were only elite if we could hold ourselves against other classes.

"Fufufu isn't it obvious Katsuragi-kun? I would have thought a class leader could figure it out." I interrupted Mashima sensei while he was spewing garbage about how it was all fair.

"Do you claim to know then, Sakayanagi-san? I see you didn't manage to score that high, so why claim you know?"

"Because I had considered the option, but decided it wasn't worth investigating further. However, if you want proof that I know, then how about Mashima-sensei sells me one point to add to my exam?" I directed the last part back to Mashima, and the whole class fell silent at my statement.

"Impressive, Sakayanagi-san. You figured it out. Yes, I will sell you one point, for, let's say, 100,000 points. Can you afford that?" So, there was a fixed value. Ayanokouji had obviously sent me exactly what I would need, already knowing the price, proving that the teachers had some hidden rules. I would need to investigate that further.

"Fufufu of course." Saying this, I passed him my student ID, the points were transferred, and the results live updated to show me at 101%, sitting below Kouenji. "See Katsuragi-kun? A true leader understands the system."

"Ahahaha, you got him princess" Hashimoto gave his support to me, and following that, most of the class did too. Some students remained on Katsuragi's side, notably the annoying Yahiko, but

apart from them he was done. It would only take one more mistake for him to fall. And then Ayanokouji and I could play.

Flashback End

"I'm glad. Life will be much more fun with you in command. So, was that why you called me out here?"

"No, actually. I've been wanting to meet you in person ever since I saw your name on that post on the first day of school. I wanted to share the shock I felt with you. It's almost like the build-up to a romantic confession."

"I have no idea what you are talking about." I could almost be certain it wasn't that. Sakayanagi didn't strike me as someone who cared for romance.

"I suppose you wouldn't. It's been a long time, Ayanokouji-kun. Eight years and 160 days to be precise."

"You're joking, right? We've never met before last week." Ignoring all my spying that was true.

"Heh. No, I suppose not. It's just me who knows you, after all." Impossible. There was no way. Unless...

"White Room."

Incredible. A second student in this school who knew about it.

"How could you possibly know about that place."

"It's unpleasant, isn't it? When only your opponent knows your secrets."

"Not particularly. You aren't the first person here to mention that place." Her face soured slightly at that.

"Kouenji-kun, I assume. Ah, he would ruin my fun. Although I can see why that man would take an interest in someone like him."

"What do you plan to do now? My life at this school is in your hands with that information." It wasn't quite true, seeing as there would not actually be serious repercussions, but theories and rumours about that past of mine would be a problem.

"Please, relax," she added. "I've no intention of telling anyone about you at present."

"Wouldn't things be easier if you did?"

"I don't want anything to get in my way. I'm the perfect person to bury false genius. I've found little pleasure in this boring school life. So far you are the only thing bringing any interest to it. I want nothing more than to compete with you."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Please, go ahead. I'm honoured to have you ask me a question. If you'd like to know, I'm even happy to tell you how I know about you."

"No, I'm not interested in that. There's just one thing I want to know."

My eyes met Sakayanagi's.

"Can you defeat me?"

"Fufufu!" Sakayanagi chuckled softly to herself and smiled once more. "Sorry for laughing. I don't intend to insult you. I know quite well how incredible you are. I've been looking forward to this. I'll be able to realize my dearest wish by destroying the greatest masterpiece that your father ever made."

I wanted that too. My defeat would mean that the old man would lose. I wanted the sad contradiction that I carried within me to be destroyed. And if Sakayanagi managed it, it would be spectacular to watch.

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get to listen to me complain. And don't interrupt."

"I wouldn't dare."

Getting a scowl at my response, Kushida began to complain about everything that had happened over the past few days. She was loud, aggressive, and very crash with her language, and it was clear that everything she dealt with really annoyed her.

Ike and Yamauchi, along with some of the other boys, commonly came up. Obviously, she had noticed their perverted stares, and after putting up with it for weeks, her rage was clear.

"Fucking disgusting perverts, won't take their eyes off me. Can't they just realise they'll be alone forever and die. I fucking hate them all!"

This was something that she couldn't normally say. In order to keep her friendship with everyone, Kushida had to sit and take all of this behaviour, pretending it didn't happen or affect her, when it clearly did.

The topic of conversation, or rather her blasts of hatred continually shifted focus, going through almost everyone in the class. The boys, the girls no one was safe from her ire. Dealing with the 'bitch queens' Karuizawa and Shinohara, the lonely quiet students who couldn't hold a conversation, even Hirata got attacked at one point. I wasn't safe either, receiving a few insults from her, but like everything else I just sat and listened to her, responding when necessary with non-committal answers. I had to make her feel heard by me, make it feel more valuable to her to vent to me than alone in order to keep her right here by my side. This was essential.

What really interested me was her hate for Horikita. Despite doing barely anything and never interacting, Kushida hated Horikita more than anything else. It was very peculiar, and something I would ask her about eventually, but for now-

"Hey, aren't you mad at Horikita too? She saved Sudou. I thought you didn't save him because you wanted him gone?" An impressive conclusion to draw. Indeed, it had been possible for me to save him, and she knew more than most just how simple it would have been, yet I left him. That should indicate that I wanted him gone, but she couldn't conclude any more since she hadn't been privy to my other plans.

"Not at all. In fact, I had planned for her to save him." That stopped her tirade right then and there.

"Wait, what?"

"You wouldn't know because I kept it quiet, but the past few weeks I've been working on Horikita, laying the groundwork for this situation. I fully intended for her to save him, that's why I gave her the points, and asked you to shift the attention away from that

strange detail. I couldn't have anyone realising I wanted her to save him."

"But, why? He's useless, and annoying? I don't understand any of it. If you wanted him to be saved, I could have done so, or even you. So why Horikita?" That was the real question. Everything I had been working on for the last two months had been leading to the conclusion that was this question.

"Sudou was a problem, so I needed to resolve it. You didn't notice, Kushida, but as I left the room, there was one less person praising you than usual."

"Who?"

"Sudou. He couldn't take his eyes of Horikita. He owes her now, for more than one thing. For the foreseeable future, he will do everything he can to help her. Sure, I could have had you save him, but would you really want a devoted Sudou always hanging around you."

"Sudog following me, what a disgusting thought."

"Exactly. Now Sudou will be kept under control by Horikita, and she in turn has to deal with him forever." Now she should understand. There was no way that Kushida would have enjoyed having Sudou follow her around, and by framing my plan as doing it to help her out, Kushida would subconsciously file this away as me doing something in her interests.

"Hmm. I suppose that's fine. The whole class loves me even more now. I really am the greatest~" Her mask showed for a moment, a cute trademark angel Kushida smile on her face. The situation had indeed turned out as I promised her. The class loved her more than anyone, and most of them would follow anything she wanted. There was no one left to threaten her position.

Besides me.

"But I still don't understand. How did you know Sudou would fail? I mean he is dumb, but we had the test, and it was pretty easy." The last piece of the puzzle Kushida still didn't understand. I suppose I could explain it.

"In truth, Sudou passed the English exam. He probably scored as well as he did on any of the other tests."

"But how..."

"One million private points. That's how much sensei charged me to change his grade to one below failing, with the guarantee that someone would pay to raise it by one. A plan that would only work on this exam, but still effective. I paid for him to fail."

The fact that this was even an option surprised me. I had asked sensei mostly as a joke, but when she said yes, I was unprepared for it. Taking the opportunity made my life much easier. Originally, I

had been planning to somehow give Sudou the wrong exam answers, or to give him a sleeping drug the night before, but all of those were rather ridiculous. Of course, he also could have failed on his own, but relying on that chance was foolish.

In any case, the issue was resolved, and everything had gone just as I'd hoped.

"You... I don't get you. That's insane. The way you think isn't normal. To purposefully fail someone, using so many points, just to control their attention."

"Does it matter? You already knew I wasn't normal." She shuddered at the reminder. "Private points are useful, true, but only if you spend them correctly. I hope you understand what I did for you though?"

"Huh?"

"The class loves you. I have a vested interest in seeing you stay popular Kushida. I want to help you, so trust me, and we can continue this partnership for the next three years. I'll make sure you stay loved."

"Uugghh. I still hate you, don't forget it. At my first chance I will expel you."

"I'm looking forward to your attempt."

"Fine. It's not like I have much of a choice anyway. I'll help you out."

"Good. And Kushida. Whenever you need to vent, come back. I'll always listen."

"Alright." She stood up, leaving her empty teacup on the bed, and moved towards the door. Just before she opened it, she stopped and turned back to face me.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun? Thanks." She didn't elaborate on that, instead opening the door and darting out after checking if anyone was there.

What a convoluted existence. I absolutely didn't trust that 'Thanks' she gave me. Whether she was just trying to get into my good books, or genuinely meant it didn't matter. She wasn't a trustworthy person. Eventually she would betray me, unless I could get her on my side in time. Either way it would be fun. Perhaps it was a lie, perhaps it was thanks for listening to her problems, for fulfilling my promise of making her loved even more, it didn't matter. Kushida was Kushida, and all that mattered was whether she was on my side or not.

Kushida truly was a fascinating person to try to understand.

From now until the holidays, something had to happen. Whether I get bored and target a class, or someone else starts something, I needed to be entertained.

Sakayanagi was still busy sorting out her class. It was almost over, but her standing was still too shaky to risk targeting me. Ichinose and her class would do nothing, the kind people they were, and Kanzaki wouldn't risk targeting a useful source of information like me.

Come on Ryuuen. Entertain me.

Authors Notes:

There we go, the end of Arc 1. I had a lot of fun writing this chapter, and it kinda got away from me, being longer than any other I've written so far. Oh well.

To clear up a misconception from the last chapter. This is the final chapter **of this arc**. The fic is not dead, sorry for the confusion. Two SS and then arc 2 begins. Sudou trial. God it really is the most boring story, but I can't skip over it for reasons. Will explain in full A/N chapter the day I post the start of it.

As always enjoy, and I hope you've enjoyed the first arc of this fic. I can't promise to ever completely finish the fic, since life can cause problems but if I do ever end it i will make sure to finish the current arc.

I'll also be going through and editing up the rest of the chapters in this arc with feedback from people. Nothing huge, but a sentence here or there or smth idk yet.

SS - Horikita 1

Everyone else was celebrating getting extra points from Kushida, overflowing with happiness that all of their classmates passed the exam, but I had no interest in any of it.

Firmly brushing off Sudou's attempts to talk to me I made my way out of the classroom and headed back to my dorm. Really, I hope that he doesn't continue this behaviour. It's pathetic and annoying to deal with, and if I have to handle him constantly thanking or even interacting with me, I may snap. What an annoying boy.

But Sudou wasn't the reason for my worries. Normally I would have been happy enough to return, read a book for a while and just relax, my celebration for doing well on an exam, but I couldn't get one student out of my mind.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

His entire existence was an enigma to me, someone I couldn't figure out.

Smart enough to finish an exam in 14 minutes.

Strong enough to defeat nii-san.

Fast enough to almost break swimming records.

And so indifferent to the class competition despite it being the purpose of coming to this school.

There should be no way a person could be that... that... incredible. It was hard to find words to describe him. As much as I didn't want to, I had been forced to recognise him.

It was infuriating.

Someone with such overwhelming talent, wasting it all just trying to have fun.

The first word that comes to mind is idiot.

To be blessed to be so great, and to not care at all for the gift is the most arrogant, moronic action one could take. It was and insult, if I was being honest, to people like me who had to work hard for good results. To have power and not use it was the most disrespect one could throw at someone who worked hard for even a fraction of the same results.

Ayanokouji, you disgust me.

The biggest question on my mind was Sudou's failure. How did he

know? Ayanokouji was certain Sudou would fail. Not confident, not believing it was the expected outcome, there was no moment when he ever seemed unsure about his claim. No, Ayanokouji knew for a fact that Sudou would fail.

Despite him having an unreadable face, expressing nothing, even so in that moment I knew with absolute certainty that Ayanokouji believed Sudou would fail. He expected it. As an inevitability.

And that was something I couldn't understand.

Then there was the matter of the 100,000 points. I had heard rumours he had been winning them from seniors, so that explained how he got them, but why give them to me? He could have just as easily saved Sudou himself. He purchased a point, so he knew it was possible, that's why he knew how many I would need.

But why get me to do it?

Arguably it took more effort, and risk, to get me to pay for a mark than for Ayanokouji to do it himself. Perhaps he had wanted Sudou gone? But why give me a chance then.

The man was inconceivable. His plan made absolutely no sense. There was no logic, no reasoning for the outcome that I could understand, yet he still went through with it.

Nii-san would have understood. He would have figured out the plan, much faster than I would have, and would know the reasoning behind it.

Compared to nii-san I was pathetic.

But I would show him. I would improve, and bring the class to Class A. I could do it. There weren't many students smarter than me, and most of them in my class. I would manage it, without a problem. And then nii-san would see. Then he would recognise me.

But even that was difficult. Because of Ayanokouji. He had no interest in getting to class A, yet I needed his help.

Yes, as much as I didn't want to accept it, I would need Ayanokouji's help. I would find his weakness, find out what he wanted and use it, to get his help. With him on my side, we would reach Class A in no time.

But even so, before I could consider manipulating him, I had to answer one simple question. Ayanokouji was a threat, demonstrated in this exam. He didn't care for the class, just entertainment, which meant that in any situation I had to be wary of his betrayal. Ayanokouji was not someone I could ever trust to put the interests of the class first. And so, I had to answer one simple question, that drove me mad thinking about.

Who are you Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?

Authors Note:

Sorry for the late chapter, I was playing Terraria and lost track of time.

1 of 2 SS for arc one done, the next one coming out tomorrow then on with Arc 2. not much to say, but as always hope you enjoy!

SS - Kushida 1

I know exactly who Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is.

As I left his room, there was only one thought in my mind.

"I hate Ayanokouji Kiyotaka"

Never before had I felt this kind of hated towards someone. Despite all I had suffered in middle school, despite all the danger Horikita posed to my life here, I had never hated anyone as much as him.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was the devil. He was evil incarnate, and he had complete control over me.

There was nothing I could do. No way to escape. I had been forced to bend to his very will, to serve him like a fucking pet!

When he called me to his room, and made me vent to him, I had never felt so disgusted. To spill my secrets to another person, to let someone know who I was, it went against every fibre of my instinct.

To make me sit there, and confess what I thought of others, something I did everything I could to keep to myself, was just wrong.

And I hate him for it.

Before this, I had focused on Horikita. I would get her expelled and finally be able to not worry anymore. To live the life I should have had in middle school, the cutest and most loved out of everyone.

But now she was a fleeting thought in my mind, not even worth considering compared to Ayanokouji.

Of course, I would still take chances to get her out, but she wasn't a threat even close to him.

A genius, a psychopath, someone who could plan out a situation so meticulously weeks in advance like he did with those tests, like he did with Sudou's score. To predict the actions of other people with such accuracy, there was no way to fight against him.

The only problem was, I didn't hate him enough.

Despite everything he had done to me, despite how he used me without seeming to care for me, the fact was I should hate him far more than I do.

Because he met his promise. He made the class love me. He dragged Horikita further down, and raised me up even more, thanks to his plan with the tests. He promised he would make me the

center of the class, the queen of the grade, and so far, he has been living up to that.

It was infuriating. He helped me, while using me. I couldn't understand the contradiction. He had absolute power over me, yet he still was kind? Kind may be the wrong word, but he sided with me. And that was the problem.

How can you hate someone who helps you?

I had resolved this contradiction of course. Ayanokouji wasn't helping me. It was in his best interests for me to work with him, so he pretended to care. But I'm sure he didn't. There was no world in which he actually valued me. The eyes of a man so dark doesn't care about others beyond their worth to him.

If I ever became worthless, he would discard me, abandon me, like a used puppet with its strings cut.

That was the mind of the devil.

It had felt nice, though. To tell someone about my issues. Even if he wasn't really listening or caring, to vent to a human for the first time ever had felt... relaxing. To find validation from someone else was a new experience, and one which I had enjoyed.

I hate that too. To enjoy, to relax, to find it nice to be used. Ayanokouji was a monster. And my mind was fighting against me.

Oh, how nice it would be to trust him, to work with him and have a confidant. It would be amazing.

But of course, that can never happen.

Because I know who He is. I know the devil walks among us, and on a whim could crush anyone He desired.

I hate Ayanokouji, for making me feel this way.

Perhaps I could use Him. It was a risk, to be sure, but He claimed to be invested in my position. He could remove Horikita for me, bring her down and destroy her. I could manipulate Him, into serving my interests, since He wanted to help me in return.

As if. There was no possibility to manipulate a man such as He.

I would try, of course. I would suggest it, change situations to a way where it would be beneficial, but to expect Him to actually help me as absurd.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka cared for no one.

I could never trust, never relax, never assume anything around Him. He was untouchable, unfathomable.

One day I would bring Him down. One day I would get Him expelled and be free from His control. It wouldn't be easy, to defeat someone like Him, but I would do it, because I must.

He was someone I could never trust yet was forced to trust with my secrets. He was someone I could never understand, yet he explained His plans to me, unfathomable and insane as they were.

He was someone I could never hope to defeat, genius as He is, yet I had no choice but to. He was someone who listened and helped me out.

And He was someone I hated, with all my heart.

Authors Note:

Kushida SS. I did my best to figure out what she would be thinking, and I'm pretty happy with how it turned out. Kushida is a fascinating character and I can't wait to explore her more in this fic, at least more than she was developed in the LN.

Arc 2 starts next, kinda hype even though its the boring book, I feel like I've done it justice so far, making it interesting enough. As always, enjoy!

Arc 2 Chapter 1 - Time Bomb

It wasn't something I had expected to experience in my high school life, but once again I was sitting in my room listening to Kushida vent all her problems out to me.

This had happened a couple of times previously, but even so it was still an incredible experience to witness – to feel, see and experience such hate and anger from one person was not an ordinary event.

Yet I had become the one who listened to her.

Currently, I was sitting on a chair facing my bed, which she had claimed for herself, and was observing a restless demon thrown back across my mattress cursing obscenities and acting the complete opposite to the way anyone else saw her.

"I'm so fucking sick of them all. I want to vomit, just listening to them talk sometimes. Those bitches can't have a single original thought, all they do is parrot off each other, I hate them!"

Another spiel about Karuizawa, Shinohara and crew. Particularly them out of all the girls Kushida disliked especially, with many of her rants focusing on them. It was understandable for someone like her, who was reasonably smart and did in fact enjoy life, to feel frustrated, furious with spending time with shallow girls like them and have to act like she enjoyed it.

Because Kushida didn't have a choice. There was no other option for her but to get along with them. I still wasn't aware of why this was the case, but from what I had gathered, Kushida wanted to get along, be loved by everyone. The reasoning was still beyond me, but the basis for her actions was what drove her to such anger. It was a painful, suffering existence she lived, and the only freedom she had was when she vented to me about it.

"Hey, why do you think we didn't get any points today?"

That was unexpected. Kushida stopped mid rant, something about the 'morons with no restraint' and asked a serious question, all traces of anger gone.

"You heard sensei's explanation." And indeed, she had. The entire class had. This morning was the first of June, and we were supposed to receive more points, however none had been transferred to out class's cards. Many people were scared at this

revelation, fearing that we had finally lost all our points and dropped down to zero, despite the effort put in over the last month to act well, but Chiyabashira had soon alleviated those fears.

She revealed that there was an issue with the school, and that's why the points hadn't been transferred yet.

In fact, we had earned more from our midterm results.

Class A 1088 (+98)

Class B 998 (+93)

Class C 817 (+87)

Class D 200 (+80)

All the classes had benefited greatly from the test papers I sold them, achieving most likely much higher results than they would have normally, and hence more class points.

It seemed unlikely that the school would reward the classes for midterms again, however, as it was always going to be heavily biased towards the higher ranked classes. In order for the competition to have any meaning at all, there needed to be some element of fairness involved, despite the initial difficulties for the lower classes.

"Yeah, but that wasn't really an explanation. She just said there was a problem and we would get them when it's resolved. It seems a little suspicious to me." Kushida has a decent mind when it comes to thinking through problems. "The most noticeable thing was that only class C and D didn't get points." Or perhaps it was the result of her information network.

I hadn't heard anything about class C not receiving points and had assumed it was the entire grade suffering from the issue. In times like these, having Kushida under my thumb was very valuable, as her social skills made up for my main flaw: a lack of said skills.

"If I had to guess, it would have something to do with Sudou."

"Sudou? What about him?"

"He was called out by Chiyabashira at the end of class. She even rescheduled his basketball training for him. Whatever it was, was important. While I can't say for sure it has anything to do without points, it's the only other odd occurrence today, and so it would make sense."

"Huh. I hadn't even thought of that. So that idiots gone and lost our points again!?" A bit of an overreaction but hard not to assume so when you hate them.

"Not necessarily, it's just conjecture."

"You think weirdly, Ayanokouji. You're not normal."

"Obviously. You already knew that though." It was a strange thing to comment on.

"I guess. I'm more frustrated that the point gap got bigger. Like, how is it fair! Our class are literally the dumbest people ever!"

"I thought you didn't care about reaching Class A, Kushida?" It was strange, she had never expressed much of a desire or interest in reaching it, so why mention it.

"I mean, not really. I don't particularly care about the 100% guarantee, that's not why I came here." Interesting, that was an unexpected revelation. Something else to investigate but not now.

"Mostly, I just think it would be cool to be in the best class in the grade. I could definitely be friends with everyone then!" A grin from her façade showed at this, which clearly showed her lie. Or at least a partial truth, because I'm fairly certain she meant what she said, to an extent at least.

"Mm. It is a strange system isn't it."

"I guess. But hey, what is wrong with Horikita! No matter how many times someone contacts her she never checks her messages! Seriously shes..." And she was off again, back to ranting. What an insane swap she could produce.

It was no surprise this topic had come up, because Kushida had confronted Horikita, or as much of a confrontation as an angel can do, about this topic earlier this afternoon.

In any case, it seemed her interest in the missing class points was over for now. Slowly, the air filled up with more and more obscenities and hate, as Kushida properly relaxed for the first time in a few days.

She really made life interesting.

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asked a rather reasonable question.

"The complaint came from Class C. They claim that the fight was one-sided. However, when we spoke to the accused, Sudou said that their claims were false. He insists that the students Class C called him over and started the fight."

"It wasn't my fault! It was self-defense! Self-defense, I tell you!" shouted Sudou as he shouldered his classmates' icy glares.

"Except there is no evidence of that at all. In other words, we don't yet know the truth. Therefore, we have put our decision on hold for now. Our response and punishment will come when we find out who was at fault."

"All I know is that I'm innocent. If anything, I ought to receive a settlement for my trouble."

"So speaks the accused, but I wouldn't say that you have a high level of credibility right now. If there is an eyewitness, as Sudou seems to believe, then the situation may change. If anyone here witnessed the fight, please raise your hand."

No one responded to Chiyabashira's question, and almost everyone was still acting the same way as before: anger, confusion frustration prevalent on their faces.

However, there was one person who reacted by averting their gaze. Interesting

"Too bad, Sudou. It appears there are no witnesses in this class."

"Looks that way," he grumbled.

When Chiyabashira cast a doubtful look at Sudou, he glanced downward.

"In order to check for witnesses, every teacher will inform their classes of the details of this incident."

"Huh?! You're telling everyone?!"

The school probably had no say in the matter. Because Sudou had insisted it was a false charge and brought up a potential witness, the school had to be sure. For Sudou, who had hoped to hide the situation, none of this was good.

"Damn it!" Sudou's plan had already fallen apart.

"Anyway, that is all. We'll make our final judgment in a few days, taking into account any eyewitnesses and evidence. With that, let's end homeroom for the day."

Chiyabashira left, but Sudou remained at his desk. Surprisingly enough he was sitting quietly, trying to stay out of trouble. An interesting development, but pointless since his classmates had no such restraint.

"Man, Sudou, you're the worst." Ike somehow turned on his friend that quickly, right to his face even.

"Sudou, are we gonna lose points again because of you?!"

"Hey, I already said it wasn't my fault! I fought in self-defence, they started it, I swear!" Apparently, the insults were too much for him to take, and Sudou finally spoke out against the class.

As uproar enveloped the classroom, and things started to get out of hand. If we ended up losing points because of this, Sudou would most likely become the sole target of our class's frustrations. Naturally, Kushida didn't want this to happen.

"Everyone, please calm down. I'd like to listen to what Sudou-kun has to say." Kushida stood and tried to silence the commotion. Once the class settled down, Kushida gave a nod to Sudou.

"Like I said it wasn't my fault. Those two boys from class C were jealous of how good I was at basketball and called me out to the special building. They tried to beat me up so I fought them off, I didn't even hurt them that bad I swear!"

Ah, so that's what had happened. I suspected it, since it seemed strange for Sudou to have no injuries at all, but his story confirmed it.

It seemed Kouenji had realised the situation as well.

"Poor Red-hair-kun, caught up in schemes beyond his pitiful mind."

"What are you talking about Kouenji, speak like a normal person for once!"

"Hahaha a disgusting existence such as yourself doesn't deserve my explanations. Perhaps Horikita-girl can explain, it seems she has used her brain for once." A cruel jab at the end, but I had also noticed Horikita's look of realisation. And now all the attention was focused on her.

"You mean it was a setup, Kouenji-kun."

"Obviously. A perfect existence such as myself would recognise that easily."

"OK. Ignoring... that, I see your point. The whole situation is a little too suspicious." Horikita had noticed some all the strange details in the situation.

"What do you mean by suspicious, Horikita. It just seems like a fight to me?" Hirata had joined the conversation. I had thought he would be involved earlier, but it seemed he had some sort of reaction to the idea of a fight. Interesting.

"Three against one, where they started the fight. Even if they were terrible fighters, it still seems unlikely Sudou suffered no injuries. On the contrary two of them played basketball so they should have some level of fitness."

"Ah" It seemed Hirata also understood now, but most of the class was still muddled in confusion.

"See, I told you it was their fault! They're trying to kick me out of

the basketball team, I said so didn't I!" A broken clock is right twice a day. It seemed Sudou did know it was a setup but was incapable of seeing beyond just himself. The students from class c wouldn't have been bold enough to do such a thing, especially in such a specific location without prompting.

This was obviously Ryuuen's actions.

Finally. Some fun.

"Well, theres nothing more to discuss now, anyway. Class starts soon, and since there isn't any more information pondering the situation would only be harmful." I decided to insert myself into the situation. This could prove interesting, so why not help out.

"Eh? Ayanokouji-kun, what do you mean?" Kushida seemed surprised at my input, probably expecting me not to care. Reasonable from what she knew, but then again, her knowledge of my actions was either non-existent or contradictory.

"Like I said it's pointless. We should meet up again at lunch, just those who can help and talk it over again. You, Hirata, Horikita, Sudou and I."

"So, you'll help us then Ayanokouji?!" Hirata looked very pleased at my offer for assistance. He had been wanting to spend more time with me recently, and to see me take an interest in the class, his focus, was something he had been hoping for.

"How could I not? A chance to play with Ryuuen, in what world would I turn it down?"

This confused people even more, but it wasn't my problem if they didn't understand. The only people who needed to know would be at the meeting at lunch, and I could explain it then.

"Demon-boy has abandonded me, I'm broken. How could one ignore a perfect existence such as myself fufufu"

"Calm down Kouenji, I don't think you care enough to help."

"Right you are, I have no interest in resolving the situation myself. But I am looking forward to seeing what you can accomplish." Kouenji would be paying attention it seemed. More than I expected, but if it entertained him enough to provide more competition later then who am I to complain?

"One problem, Ayanokouji. Why was I included on that list? I have no interest in helping out." As expected, Horikita took her isolated stance, but in this case it wouldn't work.

"Please Horikita, help me! You're my best option!" Sudou was trying his best to get her help. Ever since the midterms he had been trying to speak with her, so this was a golden opportunity for him.

"See, you saved him last exam, Horikita. Therefore, Sudou is your responsibility." I gave a crushing response to her rejection, while Sudou continued to hop around her pleading and begging. How he

could give up his dignity so quickly was beyond me.

I could see Kushida smirking at the uncomfortable situation Horikita was in, glad it hadn't ended up being her.

"Fine, I'll come along to the meeting at lunch, but don't expect my help."

And with that, the quest to save the time bomb had begun!

Authors Note

I addressed basically everything in the previous notes, so not much to say here. Short chapter, but I've got a couple of 6k chapters already for this arc, so hopefully I can keep up with the increased length. As always, enjoy!

Arc 2 Chapter 2 - Strategy

Once lunch time came, our small group ended up seated in the cafeteria together. There were probably more inconspicuous locations to meet, and since we were waging a small war against another class hiding would have been beneficial, but since no one else suggested it I left it as it is.

In the corner of my eye I could see a couple of Class C students watching us, probably tasked with finding out how we would respond to the incident. Smart, to keep an eye out and be able to adapt to our plans, but I suspect nothing of importance will be deduced or decided today.

"You seem to get yourself into trouble time and time again, Sudou-kun." Horikita gave an exasperated sigh. She had been dragged here virtually against her will, unable to turn down Kushida in front of the class.

"Well, guess we don't have much choice. As your classmates, we'll help you out, Sudou." Hirata was again offering his support to Sudou, promising to give his assistance. As expected from him.

Not wanting to upset Horikita more than she already was, Sudou apologised, possibly for the first time since the incident began.

"I'm sorry, Horikita. I've caused trouble for you again. But it really wasn't my fault this time. All I did was blow up those Class C jerks' plans."

Sudou spoke to Horikita with indifference, almost as if he were describing someone else's problems.

"Sorry, but I don't feel like helping you this time." Horikita flatly refused Sudou's pleas for help. "For Class D to rise through the ranks, it's important to recover the class points we lost as quickly as possible. However, we probably won't get any more points now, thanks to you. You hindered those plans."

"Wait. You might be right about that, but I'm not the one at fault here! Those guys picked a fight with me! What part of that is my fault?"

"You keep focusing on who started the fight, but that's a trivial detail. Did you never consider that?"

"What's trivial about it? It makes all the difference! I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Is that so? Well, best of luck to you." Horikita picked up her

untouched tray and stood.

"So you're not gonna help? I thought we were friends!"

"Don't make me laugh. I've never once considered you a friend. Nothing makes me more uncomfortable than being around someone who doesn't recognize his own stupidity. Goodbye."

Horikita appeared more exasperated than angry. She let out a deep sigh and left.

"What the hell is her deal?! Goddamn it!"

Unable to direct his rage anywhere else, Sudou slammed his fists on the cafeteria table, spilling a nearby student's miso soup. The student glared, but when he saw how scary Sudou looked, he remained silent.

But it was fairly obvious why Horikita had that opinion. In her mind, helping Sudou was an exercise in futility. Despite saving him on the midterms, he had gone again and caused more problems. This situation would likely repeat over and over again, which was something Horikita didn't want to deal with every time. She likely believed that letting him be punished here and taking a small blow to the class points would be enough to fix his mentality.

In any case, Horikita had no intention of helping out. And I was done prompting her to do so.

"I guess it's just up to us, then."

Kushida got us back on track after Horikita's sudden departure, refocusing our attention back onto who could actually help, and the situation at hand.

"Well, I can ask some senpai's about the situation. I have some friends in the soccer club that might have some ideas, so I guess I can ask them for help."

That was actually a useful suggestion from Hirata. It was likely that upper grades had also had dealings with similar situations, since this sort of plan wasn't overly complex to think of and execute, so getting advice would be helpful.

"Way to go, Hirata-kun, great idea! I can also ask some of my senpai's about this, they might know something too."

"Kushida. Ask the rest of the grade for help. Class B especially."

"Wait, why do you say that Ayanokouji-kun?" Kushida gave a very cute tilt of her head.

"It's likely our class isn't the only one to be targeted. It would make more sense for Ryuuen to go after all three other classes. They may have some experience dealing with him."

"But why Class B?" Sudou didn't seem to understand why them specifically.

"If you had to pick one class who would be kind and helpful, which one would you name." He seemed to understand after that.

"Wait, wait Ayanokouji-kun. Are we sure this is Ryuuen's work? I don't want to arbitrarily target someone without first being sure it was him. It could just as likely have been a plot by the three boys by themselves."

It was fair for Hirata to think this way, trying to avoid blaming an innocent, since we had no evidence, yet that Ryuuen was involved, but I was confident only he in Class C would think and execute such a plan.

"No, I'm almost certain it's him. None of those three, from what I've heard at least, would be smart or bold enough to execute such a plot. This is definitely Ryuuen's work."

"Fair enough. For now, at least, I can work under the assumption that it's his plan behind the scenes."

"Yeah! With all of us working together, we're definitely gonna prove I'm innocent! Ayanokouji, you're the best!"

A very enthusiastic Sudou gave me a rough punch in the shoulder. It ached a little, but it wasn't hard or done maliciously so I let it go.

"Calm down Sudou, we don't have any evidence yet."

"Wait what about the GPS system!"

Huh?

"Hirata. Explain."

"Didn't you know this Ayanokouji-kun? Everyone who has the contact of another person can see their location on a map."

Pulling out his phone, he showed me said system. Countless dots littered the school grounds and cafeteria, showing the location of everyone he had the contact of.

"Wait that's a thing?!"

It seemed Kushida also hadn't realised that existed.

"Neither of you knew? Well, I assume the school tracks this, so maybe we could see where everyone was during the time of the incident, see if anyone was nearby or acting suspicious."

It was a good plan, but that would never happen. Despite claiming points can buy anything, the location of every student on campus over a few days was not something they would legally be able to share with just anyone. I was surprised that was a feature in the first place.

"You can turn it off, but I suspect the school still records everything, it's just other students can't see you for privacy."

Why wasn't it off by default?

"It won't work. The school wouldn't give out that information, I suspect, so you can ask, but work under the assumption we don't have it available."

I also didn't want anyone figuring out that Sakura had been

nearby as a witness, until I could figure out how to use the information.

"Oh. I'll still try, but that's a good point Ayanokouji. Hmm, so what can we do?"

"For now, nothing. Lunch is almost over, so there's no sense trying to force ideas without more information."

"You want to go see the special building, Ayanokouji-kun?" Kushida caught on fast.

"Yeah. You and I can go look this afternoon, try and find some clues. Hirata can talk to his soccer senpai's and Sudou... stay out of trouble."

It wasn't necessary to add that last bit, but I figured the extra warning couldn't hurt.

"I get it, it get it ok? I'll stay out of trouble, don't worry. I don't wanna cause more problems." A very mature response from Sudou.

"This is great, guys. At this rate, we'll clear Sudou's name in no time!"

Yes, it seemed likely that something would turn up. Whether we would clear Sudou's name as Kushida proclaimed however, was a different matter entirely.

Ryuuen had executed a good strategy. There was no real evidence that we would find, I suspected, so some sort of bluff would be necessary in order to win.

This sort of excitement, this competition was what I had been hoping to find here.

I'm coming for you Ryuuen.

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my alone time. It's unpleasant to have that time stolen from me."

Just the answer I would expect from an unabashed misanthrope. If she'd simply said she didn't like spending time with other people, that would've sounded like an excuse.

"You're cruel Horikita-san. To leave a classmate to fight alone. I hope you make some friends, so this doesn't happen to you as karma." A few tears filled up Kushida's eyes as she said this, but after having spent enough time around her, it was clear her words were vicious, hiding anger and threats behind them.

Horikita also seemed to notice this, her eyes narrowing. Interesting. Even with her exceptional observational skills, there should have been no way for her to notice the secret face Kushida had. Perhaps...

"Why was he dragged into the fight? This problem will persist until we understand that fundamental question. Got it? And until it is solved, I have no interest in helping out"

We were almost at the building when Kushida finally spoke up again.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, what did Horikita-san mean? He was dragged into the fight by a setup, right?"

"While that's true, it's not the part of the issue she's focusing on."

"Eh? But that's what the whole problem is about, Sudou getting framed by the Class C students! What else could she focus on?"

It seemed that the hints weren't quite enough for Kushida to put together, or perhaps she just didn't want to admit to the truth. This surprised me. As someone who made it her mission to understand and get along with everyone, she should know why Sudou was the one called out.

"If you were to pick one person from the class to antagonise to frame, who would it be?"

She pondered my question for a moment.

"Hmm, well the best option would be... Oh. That's why."

"Exactly. He's the type who gets angry easily, right? Whenever he's faced with someone he doesn't like, he lashes out, and speaks and acts in an aggressive, domineering way. When I heard he was being considered for a regular spot on the basketball team, I was both surprised and impressed. No one disagrees that he's an incredible player, but if he acts so arrogant and prideful, some people will come to hate him. Those who work incredibly hard for their spot would probably see Sudou as a rather disagreeable person. Then there are the rumors, right? People say that Sudou's been fighting people since junior high. I haven't met anyone who knew Sudou at his previous school, but considering how many people are talking about it, there might be something to the rumor."

People didn't hold a very good impression of Sudou.

"This was bound to happen eventually."

"So...his typical behavior, plus his repeated actions, led to this situation, then?" Kushida asked.

"Yeah. As long as he continues to antagonize those around him, trouble will inevitably follow. Also, if there's no proof, then people will use his image against him. In other words, they'll judge him based on their impressions. For example, let's say there was a murder case. There are two suspects. One of them has committed murder in the past, while the other is a good, upstanding citizen. Based on that information, who would you believe?"

If asked, nearly everyone would give the same response.

"Well...I'd pick the upstanding citizen, of course."

"The truth might be different. However, the less information you have upon which to base your judgment, the more you have to rely on whatever meager information you have at hand. That's what's happening here. Horikita cannot overlook the fact that Sudou doesn't recognize his flaws."

I didn't think this was exactly a "you reap what you sow" situation, though.

"I see. So that's what she meant..." Kushida gave a small nod. "So Horikita-san isn't going to save Sudou-kun because she wants to teach him a lesson?"

"I guess so, yeah. By punishing him, she wants him to understand himself better."

Kushida, who had been looking around continuously for the last few minutes, finally let her face shift into a savage grin.

"Poor bastard. Maybe if he wasn't such a shithead all the time, he would have more people trying to help him."

It seemed Kushida had deemed us alone enough to risk acting like herself.

"For once, I have to agree with Horikita. Wow, I never thought I would say that, but she's not wrong to try and teach him a lesson. Hahaha I actually agree with the bitch, what a strange situation!"

This was even more aggressive than usual. It seemed that having to constantly be trying to help Sudou, someone she despised, had been grating on Kushida all day, and had let go of all restraint at the first chance.

This was a problem, because my second goal was to try and meet another person here.

"Well, here we are."

We had reached the corridor where the fight had occurred, according to what Sudou had told us.

"Huh, it's empty."

That may have seemed like a redundant statement, but it truly

was the only way to describe the corridor we were standing in.

"No cameras at all. That seems unusual." The entire school was wired with cameras, yet there wasn't a single one in here. Perhaps the school expected fights to happen and gave students a place for them. In any case, the lack of them was what provided the opportunity.

"This is so weird. There's nothing here, at all." Even Kushida was struck by the unnatural area.

"Notice the temperature? With the way the building is designed, heat gets trapped, and the hallways are incredibly stuffy."

"I know, we've barely been here and I'm already so fucking hot. Ew, I'm sweating too, this is disgusting."

"That's not the point. Try having a clear head here. It's impossible, there's no way to focus properly. Without being able to rationalise it's even easier to get aggressive."

"Ryuuen-kun picked a good spot, is what you're saying."

"Exactly. There's nothing here useful. No evidence no support no clue on where to go. Sudou's case is almost hopeless."

"So there's no point trying then?"

"I didn't say that."

Kushida seemed confused at my response, before asking a question I hadn't expected her to ask so soon.

"Ayanokouji-kun, why are you helping Sudou-kun? All he's done is cause problems, and you aren't one to care about other people."

It was perplexing. My actions had gone against most of the things I claimed to believe, looking for fun and excitement, which would be easily found in Sudou's punishment. But the answer was rather obvious.

"How could I not?"

"Huh?"

"Our backs against the wall. No evidence to support us, overwhelming evidence against us, one witness and no other leads. What could be more fun than digging the class out of this hole. What could be more incredible than when I come out on top despite the situation completely against us."

"You think we can win? That's really confident Ayanokouji-kun." But then her mind processed what I had said properly. "Wait! One witness! I thought there wasn't anyone who saw the fight!"

"You weren't paying attention. When Chabashira asked for witnesses, one person reacted differently."

"Who was it? Someone in our class saw the fight?"

"I'm pretty sure. Sakura avoided eye contact with everyone, even more than normal. And the last two days she's been hiding her class presence better than ever. She's clearly hiding something."

"Wow. I never would have noticed."

She was right about that.

"That's the problem with being popular, you can't notice all the details around you properly. It's an interesting trade off."

Of course, whether Kushida would have been perceptive enough to notice Sakura was something I doubted. It would take a high level of attention to detail to notice her changes in behaviour, and probably only Kouenji, and maybe Horikita, had noticed.

"That plain bitch saw the fight, then didn't say anything? Making us do all the work just so she can slack off, fucking bullshit!"

This had gone too far. Clearly it was a mark of how confident and relaxed Kushida was around me that she could express herself in this manner right now, but with so much potential risk I couldn't have her exposed by being herself.

"I'd reform that iron mask of yours. It seems likely Sakura will be coming here this afternoon."

That stopped her. Immediately freezing in shock before reforming her cute angel face she questioned what I had said.

"Didn't think to mention it before?" I had never heard such danger in such sweet words in my life.

"I mentioned rather loudly what our plans were this afternoon at the end of class. I also asked about witnesses, before catching Sakura's eye. Hopefully she can get the courage to come talk to us outside of class without too many people around." And as I said that I could hear the quiet tap of a person slowly getting close to us.

"Do you think she picked up on it though? Sakura-san seems to be a quiet person who doesn't want to talk with people."

But as if just to contradict Kushida's opinion, the pink hair of Sakura poked around the corner of the hall.

"A-ayanokouji-kun..."

"Hello, Sakura. Nice of you to join us."

It was important to act delicately with such a girl. Rushing or pressing her would just result in a breakdown, and we wouldn't be able to gain anything from this conversation.

"I-I need to t-tell you something, Ayanokouji-kun..."

She was extremely nervous, probably not having spoken to many people at all since enrolling this school. Based on my social skills, that could have ended up being me. What a terrifying thought.

"What is it Sakura-san? Do you know something about the fight?" At least Kushida had the tact to not flat out ask if she was the witness, but I suspected this was still too much for Sakura to handle.

"O-oh Kushida-san. Yes, I-I need to tell you both. I-I saw the f-fight. I was h-hiding here, and s-saw what happened."

Her stutter was ridiculous. Sakura wasn't just bad at social interaction, but absolutely terrified of it. This was likely the reasoning behind her placement in class D.

"So you did see it? That means you're a witness! You can testify and prove Sudou-kun's innocence!" That overdid it. In her excitement to find a break in the case, Kushida didn't use gloves when handling Sakura and treated her like anyone else.

It was obvious she was flustered and overwhelmed by the whole situation and turned to try to leave. As she did so, however, Kushida grabbed her arm to keep her here, making Sakura drop her digital camera.

"Ah!"

Sakura's digital camera tumbled to the floor with a loud clack.

Sakura, flustered, rushed to pick up her camera.

"No way. There's nothing on the screen..."

Sakura put her hand over her mouth in total shock. The camera seemed to have broken on impact. She pushed the power button over and over, tried taking out the batteries and putting them back in, but the power indicator never came on.

"I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have grabbed you, it's because of that..." Kushida began.

"No, that's not it. I was just careless, that's all... Anyway, goodbye."

Kushida, unable to stop the despondent Sakura, could only watch her leave with regret. Once Sakura was out of earshot, she whirled on me.

"That's our witness? The case is doomed, we have no hope! Sakura is useless! She can't even speak in private to trusted people, let alone to teachers about a crime. God, we just wasted so much fucking time."

It would be very easy to agree with Kushida then and there, but that would be tantamount to giving up.

"No, it's fine. All I wanted was to confirm that she was the witness. This doesn't change anything, the result is still inevitable."

"Huh? You still think you can win?"

"Of course. I don't think there will ever be a situation where I can lose at this school."

"I'm a little scared by the fact that I believe you."

"In any case, I still have to work out the last details of the plan."

"So you do have a plan then?"

"Parts of one."

As we spoke, we moved to leave the special building. It was getting hotter and hotter every second and I had no intention of staying there any longer.

"Can you fill me in?" It was natural for Kushida to be curious but for the moment I would let her sit in darkness. It would suit my plan better this way too.

"Not yet. For the moment just keep making inquiries, act like we still know nothing. It wouldn't do for Class C to know we have a witness. They might do something to Sakura to silence her."

"Hmm, I guess I'll trust you for now. But you owe me an explanation."

A bold request from someone who had no choice but to obey, but I would acquiesce. There wasn't any benefit in hiding things from Kushida. The more she trusted me to be open with her, the more she would let her guard down.

Who knows, perhaps one day she could become my first friend.

Arc 2 Chapter 3 - The eyes of goodwill

We had just left the special building when a cheerful voice interrupted our movements.

"Kushida-san, you wouldn't happen to be on a date with Ayanokouji-kun here, would you?"

We turned in response to the unexpected voice. A beautiful girl with strawberry-blonde hair stood behind us. Ichinose Honami.

"Sorry to interrupt. I'd hate to interrupt you like that if you actually were on one together."

"Ichinose-san, hey! No no it's not like that we were just having a look around, right Ayanokouji-kun?" Kushida was quick to refute the question, before passing on the baton to me. Very quick.

"It's as Kushida said. We were just investigating."

"Hehe, of course I know that. But Kushida-san, you were pretty quick to deny it hmm? Are you sure there's nothing going on between you two?" She leaned towards the two of us, a cheeky grin on her face as she insinuated our supposed illicit relationship.

"Ah-ah no Ichinose-san, I swear there's nothing going on between us." Of course, she couldn't admit to something like that for a multitude of reasons, but was that a hint of blush I saw on her cheeks?

Ichinose seemed to have noticed it too, grinning successfully as she stood back up straight again.

"In any case, what are you doing here Ichinose? This doesn't seem the place that you would hang around, so you must have some reason for being here." These pleasantries between girls were something I still hadn't got my head around, and I had no interest in doing so.

"I assume the same as you, trying to look for clues to help Sudou-kun. You asked me to do help, didn't you Kushida-san?"

That didn't seem like the whole truth to me. For Ichinose, the leader of Class B, to come all the way out here must have a deeper meaning. She was more valuable coordinating a search with her helper elves, so for what reason would she come here?

"I knew I could count on you Ichinose-san! But yeah, we already had a look around inside. There wasn't anything to see..." Kushida seemed down at this last part, keeping up the act that we hadn't

discovered any clues at all.

"I thought I'd come and take a look here myself, but since you already have, would you mind filling me in?"

"It's like Kushida said. There's nothing. No cameras, no evidence, nothing useful." There wasn't any harm in telling her this, but any more information could be manipulated by Ichinose, and I didn't want to give her that opportunity.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun! We haven't even been introduced properly. Ichinose Honami, it's a pleasure to meet you!" She stuck out her hand to me, which I grasped and shook.

"We haven't spoken before this have we?"

"Nope! I've wanted to meet you since the first day but just haven't had a chance, so I'm glad to do so now!" Ah so this was her reasoning for coming here. Obviously, a class member had reported to her that I was over here, and she took the chance. As the class leader, Ichinose would be expected to be acquainted with all the important figures of our year, and I was arguably one of the most important people to be aware of.

"I'm happy to finally meet you too." It was true, I had been meaning to meet with her for some time. A chance to get a read on her was an opportunity I had been sorely missing.

"Ah, you don't have to lie Ayanokouji-kun, I can see you don't mean it."

"Not at all. I just have trouble expressing myself."

That response seemed to amuse her.

"So, what do you plan to do now? I hadn't thought much further than checking out the crime scene, but now that's already done I don't know how to help"

That was a lie. Ichinose probably understood the entire situation, from Ryuuen to the complete pit class D was in. Which made it even more interesting that she would offer her help.

"Why are you trying to help us Ichinose? Class B gets nothing out of this, in fact it probably holds you back from your ordinary lives." It was suspicious, so I decided to outright confront her about it.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, there's no need to be suspicious. Ichinose-san is a nice person, and she wants to help, what's wrong with that?"

"No no, Kushida-san, he's right to be concerned. But are Classes D and B completely unrelated to each other? We don't know when these cases will spring up, or whom they'll involve. Since the classes are in constant competition, there's always the chance that this will happen. This was the merely the first case. If the party that lied wins, that'd set a bad precedent. Also, I personally can't turn away now that I know what happened."

I couldn't tell whether Ichinose was being serious or joking.

"See, Ayanokouji-kun, we can trust Ichinose. She just wants to help."

If Kushida actually believed that then I would give up on ever hoping to understand her. More likely, she had to cultivate good relations with everyone, and blind trust was an easy method of doing so.

"Anyway, about your friend. He's a first year, but he might become a regular on the basketball team, right? That's amazing. Even if he's holding you guys back right now, he might become a great asset later. I mean, the school evaluates club and philanthropic activities, right? So, if he enters a tournament and does well, Sudou-kun could earn points. Those'll be tied to your class points, too. Wait... Did you guys not know that? Did your teacher not tell you?"

We'd only heard that it would influence our private points."

"Sensei never mentioned this to us. I knew she didn't like us much, but to think she'd hide important things hurts a little..." Kushida was looking down at the reveal of the betrayal.

This was yet another oversight, another instance where Chabashira had failed to disclose something important. I wondered if Class B had heard about this from their teacher...

A usual, our teacher didn't even pretend to give us equal treatment. Chabashira really hated our class, it was fantastic.

"Your homeroom teacher is kind of weird," said Ichinose.

"She doesn't seem motivated to tell us anything. She's completely apathetic. Some teachers are like that."

"If we knew that, more of our class would be willing to help Sudou-kun Now that we do know, we can get even more help! I knew you were reliable Ichinose-san!"

Once again Kushida spun the conversation into praising Ichinose.

"Did you know that the school evaluates homeroom teachers when their class graduates?"

"This is the first I've heard of it. Are you sure?" I wasn't interested so much as I had no choice but to be interested. That was a crucial piece of information.

"Our homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei, says it like it's her motto. She says she wants to do her best because the homeroom teacher for Class A gets a special bonus. Looks like it's pretty different for you guys."

"I'm envious of your relationship with your homeroom teacher. And your class environment."

If that was the case, what drove Chabashira to be so apathetic to us. There was no benefit to leaving us to fail, so there must be a

reason behind her actions.

"Well, it seems like there's nothing left to do here."

"Right! I was going to talk to some senpai's about Sudou-kun's case, see if they had anything they knew. You coming Ayanokouji-kun? I can help you meet some new people~" She knew I disliked interacting with dull people, and most of her friends would not be interesting whatsoever. A small stab of revenge I see.

"Actually, Kushida-san, I was hoping to have a word with Ayanokouji-kun in private, if you wouldn't mind." This seemed to surprise Kushida, although she gathered herself rather quickly.

"Ooh, wanting a private conversation with Ayanokouji-kun Ichinose, how curious. What could you possibly want to talk about?"

Ichinose seemed to realise the implications of what she said, blushing and frantically shaking her hands no.

"Wait wait no nothing like that, I just wanted to ask him a question about something." That wasn't any better Ichinose. For a popular girl she really didn't seem to have much talent navigating teasing.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't you too" Poking her tongue out at us with a smile, Kushida made her way back towards the school, to meet up with her friends. That left me alone with Ichinose, waiting to hear what she would question me about.

"You're a pretty smart guy, aren't you Ayanokouji-kun?" A strange way to lead.

"I suppose so, I can't imagine anyone being smarter than me."

"Aha, a fine line between arrogance and confidence, although I suppose you can back it up." Ichinose had made a good observation. It was incredibly, beyond all reasonable levels, arrogant to claim such a thing. But so far there hadn't been anyone to step up and reasonably challenge such a claim besides Kouenji.

"You figured out the S-system on the first day. I think that's enough proof that you're smart."

"I'm sure you would have figured it out eventually. There was plenty of evidence."

"True, but not as quickly as you." She was just stating facts. What could this be leading to; I couldn't work it out.

After a few moments of silence she finally asked, or accused me of, what she had been intending to.

"You were the one who gave Kanzaki-kun the exam papers, weren't you?"

Seriously, that was it? All that build up just to ask about the exam papers.

"What makes you think that?"

"Class A, B and C all received the papers from their leaders. None of them will say where, or who, they got them from. But later I heard that Kushida was the one who sold them to the other classes. Strange, don't you think?"

"I don't see what's strange about that."

"You don't seem to have a great grasp of social actions, Ayanokouji-kun. But Kushida isn't the sort of person to do such a thing. I think it was you, and she was your accomplice."

It seemed Kanzaki's warning about Ichinose was right. I had discounted her due to her nature, but she was incredibly shrewd, figuring out my plan that easily. There was one flaw in her reasoning, however. Kushida was absolutely the sort of person to scam points out of people. Her true self would do it in an instant, using people to benefit herself. But the angel act she put on would, or could, never consider it, so in a way Ichinose was right about that.

I had grossly miscalculated who the person named Ichinose Honami was.

The best thing now would be to admit it and go from there.

"You're right. I was the one who got the test papers and sold them to the three classes."

"Ahahaha you really do plan things well, Ayanokouji-kun. But why Kanzaki-kun, you could have come to me you know? My class picked me to be leader." This was the biggest issue for her. Why had I gone to Kanzaki and not her, despite her position? I couldn't tell her the real answer, but a garbage excuse would be seen through instantly.

"I didn't know anything about you then. I had more information about Kanzaki, so he was a safer bet to convince."

"Hmm, I suppose I can accept that. But now we're friends, so I want to get along with you, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"I'd like to spend more time with you too Ichinose. I don't know you very well, and I'd like to rectify that." The underlying reasoning went unsaid but both of us knew why we wanted to talk.

Through the searching gaze she gave me, I could see the gears moving in her mind, making connections and decisions, trying to understand me. This was the Ichinose Kanzaki had warned me about.

I truly believed she wanted to help people, to be kind and considerate to everyone around her, not just her class. But at the same time her actions refuted it. Trying to get close to me, a person she perceived as a major threat. Getting in the good books of Class D, taking advantage of our situation in a way that posed virtually no risk to her. Two opposing natures lived in Ichinose, and

eventually, with a little prodding, they would be forced to collide. To see what would happen then would be fascinating.

"Well, that's all I wanted to ask you. I guess I'll follow Kushida-san's lead for a bit, talk to a senpai that I know. He's pretty smart, so he should be able to help. Bye Ayanokouji-kun!"

And with that the strawberry-blonde girl was off, ambling back towards the school along the same path Kushida had walked.

What an interesting person. It seemed she had more potential than I realised.

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"Not at all, I just wanted your opinion on the school. You seem to have a knack for understanding things, so why not pick your brain?"

Taking advantage of our new relationship for information, very sly Ichinose.

"You heard about our summer break, right Ayanokouji-kun?"

"The vacation to a tropical island you mean?" Chabashira had mentioned it earlier in the semester, right before our midterm exams.

"I can't really believe it though. Could we really go on a vacation?"

Ichinose clearly already had her doubts from it. It was obvious from her bitter smile while considering the possibilities.

"It's suspicious after all. I think it's going to be a turning point."

"In other words, you think our class points could fluctuate wildly over summer break"

"Yeah, yeah. I think there might be a hidden task, one that has a bigger impact on us than the midterms or final exams. Otherwise, the difference between Class A and us wouldn't close much. We could diminish the gap little by little."

That was certainly true. A big, earthshaking event might very well occur soon...

"There isn't a huge gap between you though. Its only 90 points."

"True, but Class A extended their lead slightly in the midterms. Ignoring that, without big point changes Class D has no hope of ever even reaching Class C."

This was true. The gap between Class C and D was 617 points, a massive difference. If the school truly was unbiased there would be more chances to gain points besides midterms, which Ichinose had obviously considered.

"Whatever it is will definitely be interesting. If the school wants to give out hundreds of class points, it'll certainly make life fun. I can't wait to see who comes out on top."

"I guess we both have to do our best, then. But I don't want to go up against Ayanokouji-kun, you seem too strong to beat." She finished that tease off with a cheeky smirk, clearly insinuating that she wasn't afraid after all. Although I would still expect her to be cautious of me.

We continued in silence for a bit, before Ichinose broke it once again.

"Hey, I still have some things on my mind. May I ask you some questions?"

Ichinose had a radiant presence, though it was different from Kushida's. I could say that she acted without an ulterior motive.

Even when talking with a person like me, she put her best foot forward.

"We've been separated into four classes from the start, right? Do you really think they separated us by ability?"

"If you really think that, then explain how I'm in class D. I expect more Ichinose"

Horikita, Kouenji, and I were undoubtedly three people who deserved to be at the top based on their academics alone.

"So, do you think it's something like overall ability?"

I was interested to see where Ichinose went with this train of thought, to see what else she could perceive about the S-system without my interference.

"I've been thinking about it since we started here. Someone might be good at studying, but bad at physical activity. Another might be good at physical activities, but bad at studying. But if students are ranked by overall ability, doesn't that mean that the lower classes are at an overwhelming disadvantage?"

"Isn't that how societal competition works, though? I don't think there's anything particularly strange about that," I said.

Ichinose crossed her arms and hummed to herself, as if she weren't convinced.

"If we were competing as individuals, sure. But this is a competition between classes, right? If you simply put all of the superior students into Class A, then doesn't that mean the rest of us have virtually no chance of succeeding?"

It seemed she had figured it out, or mostly at least. If one ignored the stigma the school placed on Class D, you would notice all classes had some flawed individuals, and some who could very easily be in a higher class.

"There's definitely a big difference between classes A through D right now. However, I think they're trying to hide something, but going about it in a weird way. Don't you agree?"

"Of course. It's obvious the school organised the classes with a lot of thought, placing good students into lower classes as countermeasures." She had reached a reasonable conclusion, so there was no harm in contributing some more to her thoughts.

"Hmm, as I suspected Ayanokouji-kun does know more than he tells. It's a strange system isn't it."

Ichinose stopped, almost as if she'd just remembered something. I tried reading her face, noting that she wore a serious expression.

"Hey... There's something more I want to ask you, Ayanokouji-kun. Is that okay?"

It was like that bright, cheery Ichinose of a moment ago had disappeared. My body stiffened slightly.

"If it's something I can answer, I will." I felt I owed her some help after spending this walk analysing her every move.

"Has a girl ever confessed her feelings to you?"

That was unexpected.

"Really? Do I look like a guy who's ever had a girl confess her feelings to him?"

"Well, you ranked highly on the hottest boys list, so I thought you might have some experience. Sorry, its nothing."

Wait the what list? I was surprised such a thing existed. However, this confusion would mean letting Ichinose down.

It didn't look like it was nothing. However, it did look like it was a serious issue for her, and not a way to prod and pry at me for more information.

"Did someone confess to you?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Kind of."

I wasn't surprised at this. What shocked me more was that she didn't seem to know what to do. A girl with her figure and nature should have been confessed to multiple times, at least that's what I had previously assumed.

"Well, if you're okay with it, can you spare a little time after class? I have some questions about confessions. I know all too well how busy you are with the incident right now, but..."

"Sure, that's okay. I don't really have much to do."

"Don't have much to do?"

"I don't think there's much point in looking for evidence or witnesses. Kushida and Hirata should have that handled."

"But you went to the scene of the crime the other day to investigate anyway, right?"

"That was for something else. Anyway, it's fine."

"Thank you. I'll be waiting at the school entrance after class."

"Alright, I'll see you then."

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I also noticed the meeting time and location. It was right here in 10 minutes. This was interesting.

"Wouldn't it be better if I weren't here?" I asked.

"Love is kind of alien to me. I don't how to respond without hurting her feelings. I also don't know if we can stay good friends afterwards. I want you to help me."

This was the first time I felt Ichinose had made a bad decision. It seemed her consideration of the situation was influenced by her confusion, resulting in her giving me serious information about her. This probably didn't even factor into her decision, or come into consideration, but the fact was I know had secret information about her and another person.

I may as well let the situation play out.

"I'll do my best, but I don't have any experience with romantic confessions. There are probably other people in Class B who could help."

"The person confessing her feelings to me is from Class B."

I had realised this when I read the confession letter but had thought it would still be fine as long as her helper was trustworthy. I guess this was another thing I couldn't understand about relationships.

"I'd like for you to keep this secret. If not, things will probably get unpleasant. I don't think you're the type of person to go around telling people Ayanokouji." I wouldn't go sharing it randomly, but the information was valuable. I would definitely consider weaponizing it at some point. Ichinose was too trusting.

"But Ichinose, aren't you used to people confessing their feelings to you?"

"Huh?! N-no way. Not at all! I've never experienced this before. I really don't understand why this is happening."

A confession was probably an inevitability for someone like Ichinose. For many students, an important goal of high school was to get a girlfriend, and who would be more desirable than Ichinose?

"So...will you please pretend to be my boyfriend?"

I had seen this as a posibility, but it was still a little unexpected to hear Ichinose ask. I had to question her judgement once again, this plan was virtually non-existent, thought up in a panic with no time spent on considering whether it was reasonable.

"I did a bit of research, and discovered that the rejected person hurts less if the object of their affection is already in a relationship..." Oh. So, she had panicked, googled for help, and jumped on the first opportunity she had, probably one of the only boys in the grade she had contact with that wouldn't cause her problems. The error it seemed wasn't in choosing me to help, since

after considering the situation, I was probably her best option, but in pretending to have a boyfriend in the first place.

"Wouldn't it be worse if they find out you lied? This doesn't seem like a great plan."

"I could say that you and I broke up, or that you left me or something."

She really wasn't thinking straight at all.

"Honestly, you should talk it out with them. I'm really not the sort of person one would expect you to date, no one would buy it for a second."

"But— Ah!" Ichinose seemed to have noticed something, and awkwardly raised her hand. Apparently, the person in question had arrived earlier than expected.

"Um, Ichinose-san... why is Ayanokouji-kun here?" Chihiro from Class B was the one confessing. I wasn't too surprised that she knew who I was, since I was a rather well-known figure in the grade, but my appearance here was unexpected, so her confusion was expected.

"I'm sorry for bringing someone from another class Chihiro-chan."

"Is he by any chance...your boyfriend, Ichinose-san?"

"Ah... Well..."

Ichinose probably meant to say that yes, yes I was. But guilt over lying seemed to stopper her answer. The words got stuck in her throat.

"So why is Ayanokouji-kun here?"

Confused by this unexpected situation, Chihiro began to cry. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Is he her boyfriend? Why would he be here if he wasn't? Chihiro was probably struggling to understand what was going on. Ichinose, seeing Chihiro's tears, grew flustered. Uncertain of what to do, she started panicking. I'd expected Ichinose to be a stalwart, reliable person, but apparently she had an unexpected weak point.

"Um, do you mind going somewhere else, please? I have something important that I need to talk with Ichinose-san about," Chihiro said.

"P-please wait a minute, Chihiro-san. That's, um... Well, to tell you the truth, Ayanokouji-kun is..."

Ichinose was trying to make the first move and turn her down. She probably thought it would be harder if Chihiro directly said *I like you*.

"What is it?" Chihiro asked.

I felt bad for Chihiro. It wasn't often I felt sympathy, but Chihiro was already in danger. She had made no mistakes, unless one could count following your heart as one, and I didn't want to think like

that. No, Ichinose was at fault here for exposing a weakness, and Chihiro would be the one to most likely pay for it.

This was the least I could do.

"I'm just a friend. Ichinose, it was a mistake for you to call me here."

I spoke honestly, for both their sakes.

"Ichinose, it's not an easy thing to confess. So don't be an idiot, talk it out. I expected a lot more from the Class B leader. So caught up in your own confusion you didn't even consider the other party. I had high expectations of you from what I had heard, of how kind and helpful you were, but it seems you're just another helpless girl who can't think of others properly. Consider Chihiro here's feelings and figure it out."

"Uh..."

Ichinose had probably never experienced seriously falling in love with someone before. Therefore, she didn't really know what to do, or if she were doing something wrong. Trying to prevent someone's pain was useless. If you turned someone down, their feelings would inevitably be hurt.

I left without waiting for Ichinose's reply. I headed back but didn't return to the dormitory right away. Instead, I stopped by the tree-lined pathway, leaned against the handrail, and sighed as I looked up at green leaves.

After about fifteen minutes, Ichinose trudged back from the gym and walked over to me.

"Ah..."

Upon seeing me, she looked a little awkward and hung her head. But then she immediately glanced back up at me.

"I was wrong. I didn't respect Chihiro-chan's feelings. I just wanted to avoid hurting her, and to run away. That was my mistake. Love is really tough, huh?"

Ichinose muttered as she leaned against the handrail next to me. "I asked her if we could carry on like usual, but... I don't know if we can go back to how things were."

"That depends on you both."

"Yeah... Thanks for today. For coming along with me for such an odd request."

"It's okay. It was interesting."

"I guess our positions got reversed, huh? I planned on helping you, but then you ended up helping me."

"It's no trouble. But if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to know what was troubling you this morning." This was something that I had been pondering all day. I was aware of what the problem in Class B for Ichinose was, but I didn't understand her psyche enough to

determine her reaction.

"Oh. That. Well, if I'm honest it's kinda your fault, Ayanokouji-kun."

"My fault?"

"When you gave Kanzaki-kun the exam papers, everyone started to trust him more. That's not bad, but they also follow me a little less. He's more of the leader than I am right now." That was the problem, but I still didn't understand why it was one.

"That I understand, but I don't know why you care."

"It's because... I joined the student council."

That surprised me. I wasn't expecting them to accept first years so quickly. Personally, I would have waited for longer to get a better test of their character. Although with Ichinose it wasn't a huge surprise she got accepted, she had all the necessary qualities to do well.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. But it wasn't easy. I was actually rejected the first time by the President." That was illogical. She was certainly qualified, so it couldn't have been about potential. Then...

"But Vice President Nagumo came along later and invited me to join."

There it was. Manabu must have wanted to keep her away from Nagumo, but he caught her anyway.

"I really respect him. He started in Class B too, you know. And now he's probably going to be the next President, and he's leading Class A. I want to be just like him."

From what I have seen so far of the two of them, that was impossible. Ichinose could never get to the level that Nagumo had. Rumours indicate that he had expelled at least 7 people in his quest for power. Ichinose could never live up to the standard he set.

She most likely wasn't aware of this either.

I assumed that Nagumo was just using her, as a new toy or plaything from the first years. He probably made some kind of request from Ichinose in order to allow her in, or at least she owes him a favour. I had to commend that type of thinking. Nagumo was certainly an entertaining student.

"I can't do that, however, if I'm not the class leader. How can a student council member, and maybe President one day, not be in charge of her own class? I... don't like this but if I want to live up to his faith in me, I need to be in charge of Class B."

I doubt Nagumo had any faith in Ichinose, seeing her as nothing more than a means to an end. He would probably direct her at me at some point, if he could manage it, using her as a missile.

"It's not just that, though. I want to be relied upon. It's selfish, I

know, but I want to help everyone I can. I will always do my very best to answer the calls of everyone else no matter who they are. Even if one day, I may end up getting strangled by it all. That's one of the reasons I joined the student council; I can help more people that way. But now the best way to help people might be to let Kanzaki be leader, and I just... its complicated. Sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, you didn't need to hear all this."

I didn't respond to her, instead choosing to sit in silence and ponder the situation, with Ichinose probably doing the same besides me. She could likely feel the pressure of the choices already moving to 'strangle her' as she described it, and despite that couldn't find a way out that agreed with her morals.

Ichinose had trapped herself, with her selfish desire to be on the student council, her selfless desire to be kind to everyone, her selfish desire to live up to Nagumo, her selfless desire to let people make their own choice of leader. She had boxed herself in with her contradictory desires.

I wondered how Class B's Ichinose Honami planned to resolve this difficult situation. I had to admit, I was looking forward to seeing it.

Authors Notes:

First, slight change to upload schedule coming. Currently I've been trying to upload each chapter at 1pm my time, but this is getting increasingly more difficult as life gets busy. For that reason, I'm moving it to later at night for me, probably around 7pm instead. I dunno if anyone actually cares, but they will be coming out later than previously so just a heads up.

This chapter was one of the main goals for this arc, as I mentioned in the A/N. Ichinose is a lot of fun to look at, but i feel like by doing so I killed Ayanokouji for a bit in this chapter. Couldn't fix it up enough, but for my goal of studying a change in smart Ichinose, I'm satisfied.

On an unrelated note, there was a fic called The 10 Elites. It was basically The True Elites (which if you haven't read, go do so its fucking amazing) with a couple of extra characters, but a couple of days ago, it dissipated. Anyone know what happened to it? I'm just curious, because it was pretty good.

As always hope you enjoyed!

Arc 2 Chapter 4 - Shizuku

That evening I got a call from Kushida. This was unusual, due to the fact that whenever she wanted to talk, she would just barge in using the key card I gave her, knowing I never had visitors, or send me a message.

"Good, you're still up." So she wasn't even going to act civil over a phone call.

"I was going to go to bed in a bit. Did you need something?"

"Sakura's digital camera was broken, right? Since it was somewhat my fault, I had to offer to go get it fixed with her. Though if she just pulled herself together this never would have happened."

This wasn't the time to let Kushida go on a rant.

"So why call me about it?"

"It's also your fault for getting us both to the special building. You need to come along as well."

"That makes no sense whatsoever. I had nothing to do with the camera breaking."

"Doesn't matter, you're coming along. Sakura wants you to."

That was interesting. I wondered why she would want me to come along just to repair her camera. Perhaps it was a guise to tell me more about the case. It wasn't easy for her to speak up, so this excuse could have been her plan.

"Sakura asked for us?"

"No, I offered to help her. The last thing I want is to spend more time with her, but if it gets more information, I suppose I can suffer through. She said she'd go if you came along."

Interesting. But I wouldn't find out for sure until we went to the electronics shop. It had been a while since I went there and would be good to check if they had any new stock.

"Fine. Text me when we're going, and I'll come along." Hopefully she tells us some more info, or this will be an even bigger waste of time. "Is that everything?"

"Well... yes, I suppose that's all." So, she had more to say but chose not to. "I'll see you then, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Okay. And afterwards you can tell me what you wanted to say just now."

"Ah. Uh, I suppose. I'll be coming to let off some steam then anyway, I need a break." That was surprising. Kushida had never told me that before, favouring barging in at her convenience. Perhaps she had come to trust me a bit.

"Goodnight, Kushida."

"Goodnight, Ayanokouji-kun." This last part was spoken with a whisper, almost embarrassed. I didn't bother trying to understand for now though. The mind of a girl, especially one as convoluted as Kushida's was far beyond my ability to comprehend. For now, I needed to figure out what to do with Sakura.

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class, wouldn't help.

"No, no, that's not true at all. I think we're great together," she replied.

"So you're saying that someone like me is a good match for you? A narcissistic annoyance?"

"Yeah."

I felt a sharp stab at her admitting that. I was still trying to figure out who I was, and it seemed I had developed into that sort of person, due to mimicking actions and mannerisms from Kouenji and Kiryuuin.

"You're that surprisingly delicate, Ayanokouji-kun? I don't really care what others say. I don't think it's an insult at all. I really think we suit each other."

I felt like she was teasing me somehow. Considering it logically, based on our goals and abilities, we were a good match, but that didn't explain why she would think that way. Kushida could never settle with a singular person.

The interesting part was why I cared. I couldn't figure that out. Kushida was objectively attractive, I didn't believe there was a single guy who would disagree, but that didn't explain why **I** cared. True, I had intended to experience all that a normal high school life had to offer, which hopefully involved falling in love with a cute girl, but Kushida?

It seemed my thoughts had moved in that direction slightly without realising. An unexpected development. With the dangerous balance we both had, it would be essential to keep an eye on how I truly felt about her. One slip could mean my downfall, so she wasn't a viable candidate to fall in love with. Yet my mind was forced to acknowledge her attractiveness, and on some level show an interest towards her.

"So, what about Sakura-san?"

"I don't see her yet."

It was the exact time we'd agreed to meet, but there still was no sign of her.

"Hmm... wait isn't that Sakura-san sitting next to us?"

Sakura, clearly flustered and indeed sitting on the bench next to us, stood and gave a sheepish bow. Had Sakura really been sitting there the entire time? To think I didn't notice her at all. The distractions of the female truly are dangerous.

"I'm sorry, I don't stand out much, I suppose... Good morning." It was an ordinary greeting from someone dressed up in an extraordinary outfit. Sakura was wearing a hat, and even a surgical face mask, which made it difficult to recognize her at a glance. I wondered if she'd caught a cold or something.

"You kind of look suspicious..."

"Rather than saying you look suspicious, I think you actually stand out more."

"Yeah, I suppose so. I think I do stand out, especially here," Sakura responded. Sheepishly, she removed her mask.

She didn't seem to have a cold. Rather, she seemed like the type to wear the mask in order to avoid attention. She must have really hated standing out.

"So anyway, about my digital camera. Is it okay if we go to the electronics store in the mall?"

"Yeah, sure Sakura-san. It was my fault that it broke, so I'll be happy to pay for it to get fixed."

"Th-thanks but you don't have to do that. Just coming along... is enough."

What could cause such a reaction in someone to make them so afraid of society? It seemed any kind of interaction was more than Sakura could handle.

We made our way to the electronics shop, Sakura practically hiding behind the two of us. If someone didn't pay close attention, she wouldn't be noticeable at all, and would only see Kushida and I out for a day at the mall.

As we entered the electronics store, I took a moment to head over to one of the isles, checking if any new merchandise was on sale.

"Nothing new, huh."

It wasn't a problem. What I had currently would still work, but I was hopeful that something new would come in. While like most conceivable topics, I had been trained in technology and surveillance in the White Room, technology developed at a much faster pace than say, Karate. In just the one year since I last had a lesson, there had been major developments I hadn't followed. This made having someone like Sotomura around much more valuable, as a reference that could keep up and help me learn what I had missed.

While I had been browsing the merchandise, Kushida and Sakura had made their way over to the service desk, in the back corner of the crowded store.

"Ah..."

For some reason, Sakura suddenly stopped in her tracks. When I glanced over at her, I noticed she was wearing an expression of blatant fear and revulsion. It seemed that something had upset her quite a bit. However, when I followed Sakura's line of sight, I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"What's the matter, Sakura-san?" Kushida asked.

She also must've thought Sakura's behaviour was strange.

"Ah, umm... Well..."

Although it seemed like she was about to say something, all Sakura did was shake her head and take a deep breath.

"It's nothing."

She donned an earnest smile and walked to the repair counter. Kushida and I exchanged looks but decided to follow her. Maybe it really was nothing, like she said, just her social anxieties playing up, but I found this extremely unlikely. Kushida talked to the store clerk and asked him to repair the camera.

While she handled the interaction, I spent my time watching the mannerisms of both Sakura and the clerk. Both of them were acting extremely odd. Sakura was hiding, even more than she had been on the way in, practically crouching behind the two of us. And despite her obvious intention to stay out of sight, the clerk hadn't taken his eyes off her. It was a possessive gaze, everything about his actions was focused on her, paying just enough attention to Kushida to continue their interaction without allowing anything to draw his attention away from Sakura. It was really creepy, and it made sense why Sakura had wanted our help.

He'd struck up an interesting conversation with Kushida, who had somewhat dragged his attention off Sakura by slightly flaunting her assets. I would need to commend her for that later, sparing Sakura from the lecherous gaze, no matter how much Kushida must have loathed everything about the situation.

The store clerk seemed to have a fascination with Idols, conversing with her about any topic related to them. He aggressively engaged Kushida in conversation, without even pausing for a breath. Although I could just barely hear the conversation, it sounded like he was asking Kushida on a date. He asked if she wanted to see a certain female idol's concert, which was being screened over in the theatre.

The most notable thing I got from the conversation was Sakura's reaction. Every time he mentioned the word Idol, Sakura flinched. I was missing a crucial piece of information about the situation, but I felt this conversation wouldn't reveal it, at least in a reasonable time frame.

He seemed to be getting excited over talking to Kushida about a topic he enjoyed, but their conversation didn't proceed any further. As I'd expected, Kushida began to feel awkward. In order to conclude their business, she urged Sakura to hand over the camera. When the store clerk opened up the camera to confirm the contents, he saw that part of it had been damaged from the fall. That was why the camera wouldn't turn on properly. Fortunately, because Sakura still had the warranty card, the item could be repaired free

of charge.

Finally, all Sakura had to do was fill out her contact information, and we'd be done. But Sakura's hand suddenly stopped as she filled out the form.

"Sakura-san?"

Kushida, thinking that something strange was going on, called out to Sakura. She seemed to be hesitating for some reason. I didn't intend to say anything at the time, but her attitude seemed to weigh on my mind.

"Can I see that for a second?" I asked.

"Huh?"

Standing next to Sakura, I reached for the pen she was holding. She didn't seem to understand why I wanted it, but she anxiously handed it over.

"When the repairs are finished, please contact me."

"H-hey, wait a minute. Contact you? She's the owner, isn't she? That would be..."

"The manufacturer warranty explicitly shows where the item was sold and the date of purchase. Also, I doubt there'd be any legal problems with me putting my information down. It should be perfectly fine if the user's name is different than the purchasers."

Before the clerk could say "I understand", I'd entered my name and my dorm room number into the required fields.

"Or is there a reason why she specifically has to enter her information?" I added, staring directly at him, showing the clerk a fraction of the darkness in my eyes.

"N-no, not at all. I understand. There's nothing to worry about," the clerk said. I think he peed himself but pulled himself together enough to complete the preparations.

Shortly after I'd completed the form, I handed it over with the camera. Sakura gently patted her chest and sighed in apparent relief, but when she learned it'd take two weeks for the camera to be repaired, she grew discouraged. Her shoulders slumped.

"That clerk sure was something else. The way he stared at you was horrible, Sakura-san." Kushida said.

"I-I'm sorry you had to go through that Kushida-san"

"No no its no trouble! Is that why you wanted us to go with you?"

"Sakura gave a meek nod. I guessed that something had been off even when she first purchased the camera. Turning to me, she asked, "What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"He's a disgusting man. I would expect girls to have a hard time approaching him."

"That was kind of what I was trying to get at before... I was scared to go to the repair shop alone because of that..."

"That's why you wrote your number down instead of Sakura-san's, Ayanokouji-kun." I'm sure Kushida had already realised this, being a cute girl and constantly leered at by boys, but in order to keep up her façade she had to pretend she hadn't realised the whole situation completely.

"Th-thank you...Ayanokouji-kun. You really...saved me."

"Nah, I didn't really do anything. I just wrote down my address. When they contact me about the repairs, I'll get in touch with you right away, Sakura."

Sakura nodded, looking glad. If that's all it takes to please you, then it actually makes me sorry for you.

"You really looked out for Sakura-san," Kushida said.

"Well, you're making it out to be bigger than it was. Honestly, I was only watching out for that rather weird clerk. I guess he gave the impression that he really, really loved girls."

"Ha ha... That's certainly true."

"Since you were with me today, Kushida-san, we completed our task without me having to talk at all. Thank you."

If Sakura had faced that store clerk one-on-one, she probably would've run away.

"Oh, no need to thank me. If you're okay with my help, then I'm happy to lend a hand any time. Sakura-san, you really like your camera. Don't you?"

"Yeah... I've liked cameras ever since I was little. My dad bought me one before I entered junior high, and I absolutely fell in love with it. Or I suppose you could say that I just love taking pictures... I'm not really well-informed when it comes to this stuff, though."

"I think being knowledgeable and liking things are separate matters. It's wonderful to be so passionate about something."

"Sakura, do you ever take pictures of people?"

"Huh?!"

Sakura stumbled back at that. It seemed like a question she hadn't expected, despite it being a rather natural one. Another interesting reaction from her today. The situation grew ever more curious.

"Th-that's a secret."

Well then. It sounded like she didn't want to go into the details with me.

"W-well, it's just... It's embarrassing," replied Sakura, her cheeks reddening. She looked down as she spoke."

"Don't worry about it, I was just curious. In any case, I suppose we're done today."

"Umm... Thank you for everything today. You really helped me out," Sakura said.

"It's okay, it's okay. There's no need to thank us. Actually, Sakura-

san, you can talk to us normally, you know? If it's okay with you. We're in the same grade. It sounds a little weird when you speak so formally to us."

It was certainly true that Sakura's speech patterns weren't exactly what you would expect from a peer. But changing that might be easier said than done for her; she was visibly perplexed."

"I didn't mean to sound that way. I wasn't aware of it... I sound weird?"

"It's not really a bad thing! I mean, I'd be happy if you didn't speak so formally to me, though."

"Ah... O-okay... I...I got it. I'll do my best."

I thought that Sakura would have rejected the notion, but she managed to squeak out a few words of agreement. It seemed like she wanted to accept Kushida's proposal. Perhaps this was how people became friends, little by little. Even Sakura, who seemed to have hardly interacted with another person ever, was steadily growing closer to Kushida.

"It's okay, though. You don't need to force yourself."

"I-It's okay. I...will."

"Well then, we'll see you at school. Okay?"

With that, Kushida thought the conversation had ended. However, rather unexpectedly, Sakura didn't move.

"Well!"

Sakura spoke in a small voice but looked straight at us. When our gazes met, however, she immediately averted her eyes.

"About Sudou-kun... As my way of saying thanks for today, I... Well, that might be a little misleading, but if you like..."

She paused, and started again more clearly.

"I-I may be able to help you with Sudou-kun's case."

This is what I had been hoping for before the trip, but now it seemed unnecessary.

"Don't worry about it, Sakura"

"Ehh?"

"Wait what do you mean Ayanokouji-kun? Sakura is the witness; we need her help."

This was true when we last discussed it yesterday, but I now had a much better plan in store for solving the issue with Sudou.

"No, it's fine. I've got everything under control, you won't need to testify." It was clear how much she didn't want to do so, and forcing her, or the equivalent of it like what was happening now, could only work against us. "There's no need to force yourself to. Instead, just head home after school and stay in your room. I'll just say you're unwell, and that will give us some extra time."

It wasn't a foolproof plan, but if worst came to worst Sakura

would just have to testify. Nothing was lost by trying out my new plan.

"A-are you sure? Ok then... thank you Ayanokouji-kun. Sorry to be so much trouble"

"It's no trouble at all, Sakura-san. Just leave it to us!"

Kushida gave Sakura an incredibly cute smile, and Sakura's cheeks turned up slightly at seeing it, before quickly turning and making her way back to the dormitories.

"That was a horrible time, wasn't it Ayanokouji." To say such a thing with a smile on her face was always an incredible thing to see.

"I suppose it wasn't a great use of our time, but I got something out of it."

"Oh? And what could that be. Perhaps you enjoyed spending time with sweet little Sakura-san?" Kushida seemed to be implying I had any interest in the girl. While she was objectively attractive, I had no time nor inclination to put any care towards such a socially stunted girl who could provide me nothing.

"Nothing like that. I just figured out how to make life more fun. It seems I'm going to have to involve an old friend in this matter."

"Hmm, if you say so. Don't go doing anything without letting me know first. I'm the one who has to clean up your mess after all." What a cheeky slave.

"Don't go getting cocky Kushida. Just do what I say, and everything will go perfectly."

"Yeah yeah, relax. If you want to leave the bitch out of the trial, then that's what will happen. I have more friends to catch up with now, so enjoy being lonely for a while Ayanokouji. Bye!"

And with that Kushida also left, leaving me alone to ponder and plan. What a cruel woman she was.

□□□

We both dug in, and Kushida had stars in her eyes from the cooking.

"I thought you said you couldn't cook Ayanokouji, this is great!"

"I never said I couldn't cook, just that I wanted to practice. Practice never hurts." Even for someone trained in cooking by five-star chefs from age 7. Who knew when you would have to impress someone with a meal, much like now.

"It's amazing! Right, you're now my personal chef. Whenever I come over from now on, I expect a meal, no take-backsies." It was rude of her to impose herself so quickly, but it wasn't much trouble. I did prefer cooking for myself than eating food from the school, so increasing the portion sizes wouldn't be difficult.

"Fine. It would be helpful to have someone else critique my food."

"Great! I can't wait to eat more of your meals Ayanokouji."

Kushida continued to babble about inconsequential things to me, while I washed up the mess created from the meal, half listening to what she said. This was a side of her I had never seen before. Talking about things she actually cared about and was interested in, while it was useful information, was also something she hadn't been comfortable sharing with me before.

It seemed that these were things she actually did enjoy as well, as opposed to the fake interests she took when talking to other people. Kushida genuinely had grown comfortable enough around me to open up. It would explain her strange actions, seeming to care more, her lack of insults or general distain towards me, and most importantly the fact that she forewarned me she would be coming tonight. Everything indicated that she had grown to trust me.

I had been waiting for this moment. Now, she would be likely to explain herself if pushed, as opposed to clamming up. It was essential that this happened now, as if it happened any later she would probably retreat and close up again, with a renewed fear of me.

"Well?"

I gestured towards my bed. That could have been taken in a very different manner, but fortunately Kushida overlooked it, and once I had seated myself on the end, she sat down in the middle of the bed, leaning against me. It seemed to be a comfortable position for her, a favourite while she spewed garbage about virtually everything around her.

"So, you remember how I had to go meet friends after we finished our business with Sakura? God, it was horrible. I had to spend four fucking hours with Inogashira and..."

As usual, Kushida launched right into story, with little regard for who it was about. Everyone was scum in her eyes, and apparently

spending time out with friends was something.

But as the conversation flowed, and we neared the hour mark, I noticed a discrepancy. My name had never been mentioned. Thinking back, Sakura's had definitely come up, as 'the bitch with cow tits who can't speak for shit', and even the electronic store clerk had been mentioned, but I was never brought up. Another piece of evidence that she had come to care for me, even if only slightly, in her own way.

No, that wasn't right. She wanted me to trust her. Perhaps, in some way she did come to trust or have some affection towards me, but that was irrelevant. Kushida was not someone to let that slip out. This was an attempt to get me on her side. There was nothing trustworthy about her at all.

"Why do you do it Kushida?" The time for answers had come.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Pretend to be someone you're not. Try to get everyone to be friends with you, to love you? You don't seem to enjoy it, so I don't get why you bother."

That seemed to stump her. Kushida stopped talking and sat quietly for a few moments. I let her sit, not interrupting her thought process, leaving it all up to her.

"Ayanokouji, you're really smart, right? And super fit too. You know what it's like to be the best. Don't you think that the best thing in the world is feeling valued in some special way? When you get the highest score on a test, or win first place in a race, everyone's eyes are on you. You know those moments when people shower you with attention?" asked Kushida.

Of course, I understood the concept. People naturally desired the approval of others. Working hard enough to earn praise for accomplishments was fundamental to how human society functioned. Unfortunately for Kushida's explanation that didn't apply to me. I was fundamentally indifferent to others.

I wasn't going to interrupt her to correct this misconception, however.

"I think that I'm probably addicted to that feeling," Kushida said. "More so than normal people. I can't help wanting to show off. I can't help wanting to stand out. I can't help wanting to be praised. When I am, I truly feel how wonderful it is to be alive. But I know my own limits. No matter how hard I try, I won't be number one in school or in sports—and coming second or third won't satisfy my cravings. So, I thought I'd do something that no one else could—be nicer and kinder than everyone else."

That was the root of Kushida's kindness? It was better to be a genuinely kind, helpful person who made mistakes than someone

two-faced who just bragged about being perfectly good. A kind but flawed individual was more honest than a saintly liar.

"Thanks to that, I became popular with both boys and girls. I took pleasure in being trusted and relied upon. Elementary school and junior high were really fun," said Kushida."

This was an extreme reaction to praise. I had considered something along these lines as a possibility, but never outright thought it was likely, or to the extent that Kushida suffered from it.

There was just one problem, which I had been observing since that fateful night in May.

"It's agonizing thought, isn't it? Doing things you don't want to do every single day. That's why you need to vent to me."

"Of course, it's agonizing. Day after day, I'm under so much stress I feel like I'm going to go bald. I've pulled my hair out and vomited from anxiety. But I can't let anyone see that side of me. That's why I continued to endure, and endure, and endure," said Kushida.

Even with her venting to me, there was no way she could have kept this up for so long.

"My blog saved me. It was the only place where I dumped out this hidden stress. I could tell it all my most painful secrets. Of course, I posted everything anonymously, you know? But I wrote the facts just as they were, and it made me so happy when I received encouragement from people I didn't even know. Then, one day, a classmate discovered my blog. Even though I hadn't named anyone, it was clear my posts were all based on real events."

"That's how everything went wrong?"

"The next day, my posts were shared with the entire class. Everyone condemned me. I'd helped them so much, and yet they all turned on me. Selfish, right? The boy who'd told me that he liked me actually shoved me. It was understandable, though, since I'd posted that his romantic confession grossed me out and I wanted him to die. One girl I'd comforted after she was dumped even kicked my desk. I'd posted in detail about why she was dumped and made fun of her. Over thirty students decided I was their mortal enemy that day."

"And so you exposed everything." It wasn't a question but a statement.

"Yep. I revealed all my classmates' secrets. Who hated who, who thought who was a disgusting creep. I exposed truths I hadn't even written on my blog."

Truth was a weapon you could only obtain through trust. I had long ago realised such a fact, which was why I kept Kushida so close to me, making her my most valuable tool. My only flaws, which involved my social skills, she wielded with utmost precision,

accomplishing things I would never be able to. And clearly, she had experience doing such a thing, destroying a class in a single day out of spite.

"At that point, my classmates stopped being angry at me and started hating each other. The boys got into fistfights, the girls pulled each other's hair and shoved each other over. The entire classroom descended into complete chaos. It was honestly incredible."

"So, that's how it happened."

"Because of everything I exposed, the class could no longer function. The school rebuked me, but my blog was anonymous, and all I technically did was tell my classmates the truth." Kushida spoke indifferently, but every word she uttered carried weight. "I still don't know that much about my fellow Class D students. However, I know enough to destroy a few people. That's my only weapon."

And a deadly weapon it was. Despite her playing it down, I suspected she already had information on almost everyone in the class, and probably some involving students in other classes. Out of everyone in the grade, I suspected only Ryuuen and Sakayanagi were more unpredictable than Kushida, the only ones capable of wreaking more havoc than her. And even then, not for long.

"It was a mistake to use the blog to vent my feelings. Everything was there to be found by someone, to expose myself, just like you ended up doing on that rooftop."

Then she did something unexpected. Reaching behind herself, Kushida grabbed and held onto my hand softly.

"Now I can vent to you. I'm not totally alone anymore."

She said this last part softly. Could she actually mean it? Did Kushida actually trust, or possibly even care about me? I couldn't tell.

"Do you want to remain as you are right now?" I asked.

"This is my reason for being. More than I love anything else in the world, I love everyone respecting and noticing me. When people trust me with their secrets, I feel joy that surpasses my wildest imaginings."

Knowing the anxiety, suffering, embarrassment, and hopes that people held deep within their hearts was Kushida's forbidden fruit. And that made it just that much easier to manipulate her. By feeding her what she wanted, Kushida would grow addicted not just to praise, but to me getting it for her. Hopefully, she could grow to be dependent on me.

"Boring, isn't it? But to me, it's everything."

"I can't pretend to understand. Acting like that and caring enough

to do that is beyond me." She pulled back a little at this. "But I'm always here to listen when you need to."

I couldn't see her face, but I felt like Kushida was smiling a little. Perhaps the only true smile she had given while at this school.

After a few moments, Kushida spoke up again.

"Hey, Ayanokouji?"

"Hm?"

"If I wanted to expel someone, would you help me?"

That threw a wrench in my theory that she liked me. It now made much more sense that she was trying to get close to me, and then use me for her own ends. That felt much more like the Kushida I knew so far. But it still felt like she was genuinely warming up to me.

Perhaps it was a mix of the two options. Women were inscrutable.

"It depends on the person and when, but I suppose I would. I said I'd help you after all, and I intend to stick with that."

"Ok." It seemed she didn't want to elaborate on the question, satisfied with knowing I would help her out if she needed it. It wasn't a lie, I almost certainly would, unless it interfered with my own plans. I expected her to understand that without it being explained.

I didn't want to end the moment, but there was one last thing I had to talk to her about. I had noticed Kushida staring intently at Sakura while at the shops. More than just trying to be kind, it was like she was staring at someone she half-remembered, but was out of focus, trying desperately to see where they were from.

"Kushida, did you perhaps know Sakura before coming to this school?"

Kushida jumped slightly, perhaps not expecting the change in topic.

"Huh? You noticed my stares, then."

"Obviously."

"Aha, nothing gets by you does it Ayanokouji? No, I don't know her, but she looks familiar. Just without glasses and different hair, I feel like I know her."

Hmm. Perhaps my observations combined with Kushida's knowledge would help her remember.

"If it helps, she was constantly jumpy whenever the word 'Idol' was mentioned today."

"No, that doesn't help much..."

"Also, her glasses are fake."

At this, Kushida jumped up from the bed, whirling around to face me.

"You didn't think to mention that earlier!" She had her phone in her hand, frantically typing something. It seemed that the glasses had triggered a connection.

"I noticed it just before she left. The glass is flat, not curved like a prescription. They're completely cosmetic."

"Well, ignoring that insane observation you made... here, I think I found her!" Passing me her phone, Kushida showed me the website of a teenage idol, Shizuku.

"Hm, she does look similar. And if you pay attention, this photo here."

"What about it?"

"That's a school dorm isn't it?"

Kushida held the phone closer to her face, trying to get a good look.

"It is! Does that mean..."

"Sakura is Shizuku. It's honestly surprising."

"I know! Such a quiet girl normally, she looks so energetic and happy in these pictures. She's a completely different person."

While Kushida continued to rant about how Sakura was living a double life, I spent my time scrolling through the comments on some of the posts. Now this was interesting. It seemed there was a fan of hers closer than usual. Much closer, if today was anything to go off.

Meanwhile, I felt my own phone buzz in my pocket. Taking it out, I saw an affirmative to the request I sent to my friend asking for help. I grinned internally. Once again, everything had fallen completely into place. If I was confident the other day, there were no doubts left at all now.

Time to get Kushida to utilize her skills properly. I would enjoy witnessing her magic at work.

"Kushida."

"Hm?"

"I have a rumour I'd like you to spread..."

Authors Notes:

Full disclosure: I hake Sakura. She sucks in every way possible, i want her dead every time i read or write her. That said, she's still a character so I will treat her with the utmost respect.

As for the Kushida/Ayanokouji relationship, I'm pretty happy with what I have. Neither is the type to genuinely care for someone, but even so they have spent a pretty decent amount of intimate time together in this fic, so of course something happens at least a little. This felt like a reasonable progression, so I went with it. And of course, Kushida is a bitch but she's not emotionless like

Ayanokouji, so its inevitable that she feels something, at least a form of calm and caring for the only person she can open up to, no matter how much she might or might not like it.

It's also come to my attention that when I switched from character dividers between sections to Microsoft Word dividers, these stopped copying over. I don't remember when I changed but I'm going back through now to find and fix these up.

As always, hope you enjoyed, and we are on the new upload time as of this chapter.

Arc 2 Chapter 5 - Trial

The day of the trial finally arrived. Over the few days since Kushida, Sakura and I had been to the shops, nothing in the case had changed. Despite her claims to help, Ichinose had been unable to find any new evidence, and apparently Kanzaki hadn't been as sympathetic to our plight, and Class B had followed his lead, putting in less effort to help than they probably would have with Ichinose in charge.

It was an interesting development. Even thought I was fairly sure that the majority of the class were much kinder than most students in the grade, and it seemed their bond of friendship still formed the basis of their class, without Ichinose as much in the forefront, the general class attitude had shifted slightly, enough to make them less willing to help others as much. It showed just how much a leader could influence their followers.

Horikita had decided that due to our lack of efforts to produce results, it was her god-given right to intervene slightly, blessing us with her superior intelligence to provide us with the already known fact that Sakura was a witness. It was annoying, the way she removed then inserted herself into the case on a whim, but I allowed her to have her moment of grandeur.

Despite this, we made no attempt to approach Sakura, and it seemed that while this disturbed Horikita, she kept herself out of it, seemingly believing that now her input was over she had no more interest in the case. I had been concerned about her actions, as they could be the one thing to possibly throw my plan off track, but it appeared that even though Sakura hadn't come to school today for unknown reasons, she wasn't going to do anything more to intervene.

Or so I had thought.

As the bell rang for the end of class, Kushida and I stood up, making our way to the door where Chabashira and Sudou were waiting.

"Let's do this!" As expected, Kushida maintained a positive attitude right up to the final moments.

But before we could leave Horikita interrupted us.

"Wait. I'm coming too."

Interesting. I hadn't expected her to intervene. Though I suspected her presence wouldn't have any impact on the trial at all, based on what Chabashira had told me earlier. But there was no way I would let her come along without a fight

"And why should we allow that? You've contributed nothing so far, so I don't see why your presence would be helpful."

"There's no need to be so negative Ayanokouji-kun. Horikita-san would be great to have along!"

"You've single-handedly butchered this entire case Ayanokouji-kun. I thought you were more capable, but it seems like I overestimated your abilities." So, she's come to rescue me? How adorable.

"Yes! If Suzune helps us there's no way we can lose!"

"Don't call me by my first name, Sudou-kun." It seemed she still had no intention of showing any kindness towards Sudou. In fact, I doubted she cared about saving the case, probably still wanting Sudou to fail. This was just a chance for her to regain some of the ground she lost against me in her delusion that we were competing.

"Fine. We don't have a lot of time, so come along if you must."

I couldn't really go against the other two, and Chabashira had been standing by impatiently, checking her watch constantly.

Chabashira lead us through the corridors of the school, and as we passed the faculty room, I saw confusion appear on Horikita's face. Unlike the other two, she hadn't been with us when we met with Chabashira to discuss the situation earlier today, and hence had no idea where we were going. It was foolish of her to insert herself into this situation without all the information, but that's just who Horikita is.

"Sensei, where are we going? We passed the faculty room already."

"The school has some complicated rules, but in cases such as these a settlement is reached between the homeroom teacher of the class in question, the concerned parties and the student council."

Horikita froze at the very moment she heard the words "student council". Chabashira turned and glanced sharply at Horikita's face.

"If you want to stop, now's the time, Horikita."

"Eh? What's going on?" It seemed Kushida didn't understand the situation, with Sudou looking just as confused next to her.

"Horikita's a bro-con, that's all" This didn't clear up anything, but it made Horikita get angry at me instead of nervous, allowing us to refocus and move on.

"Shut up Ayanokouji-kun!" Recollecting herself, she turned back to Chabashira. "Let's go. I'm fine."

We walked up three floors to the fourth, where a placard that

read "Student Council Room" was affixed to the wall near the doorway. I hadn't been here since the first day of school, and by the way the other three were nosily looking around, I suspected they hadn't ever been here.

The five of us entered the room, to see it had been changed a bit since I was last here. Long tables had been arranged in a rectangular formation. At one of them, the three Class C students were seated, with their homeroom teacher Sakagami standing behind them. At the head table, two students were seated. The Student Council President Horikita Manabu, and to his side his loyal assistant and propaganda machine Tachibana Akane.

"Sorry we're late."

"It's before the scheduled start time. There's no need for apologies, Ayanokouji."

Manabu and I gave each other a short greeting. I could see him looking over our group, his gaze lingering questionably on Horikita, wondering why she had come. In turn, the younger sister was completely frozen, staring straight at Manabu, ignoring everything and everyone else in the room.

Giving her a prod, I moved our class to the last remaining table, where we took a seat. Sudou on my left, Kushida on my right, Horikita on the far end where she belonged, and Chabashira standing behind us, mirroring Sakagami.

Once Manabu was finished going over the papers on his desk, he looked up again, and began the meeting.

"Well then, I would now like to discuss the violent incident that occurred last Tuesday with the members of the student council, the involved parties and their homeroom teachers."

Standing, he moved over to another pile of papers on his usual desk and picked up what I assumed was the report for the incident.

"Both parties have had a chance to explain themselves and the situation. While most of the facts concur between stories, there are still some inconsistencies that need to be identified before we render judgement. For that reason, we would like you to identify which version of the events is true. Tachibana?"

Tachibana also stood up and turned towards us.

"Komiya-kun and two other members of the basketball club went to the special building after Sudou-kun called them there. There, they claim to have been beaten up in a one-sided brawl. Is this true?"

"What those guys said was a lie. I was the one that got called over to the special building," Sudou said. "That day, after practice Komiya and Kondou asked me to go to the special building. Honestly, I thought it was kind of annoying, but I also thought it

might've been because they were always hostile towards me. So, I went to meet them."

Sudou wasn't one to mince words. The interesting part of Tachibana's statement was there was an error, one I could possibly exploit to destroy the case.

"That's a lie. Sudou-kun called us over to the special building."

"Don't screw with me, Komiya! You were the one who called me, you jerk!"

"Quiet Sudou. Remember your position here." It seemed the outburst from Sudou and Komiya was too much for Manabu to let slide.

"Right now, we're merely listening to what both parties have to say. Komiya-kun we ask that you too please show some restraint and not interrupt." Tachibana was much nicer with her warning.

"Puh, fine..."

"Both parties insist that the other called them over, so the accounts conflict. However, the stories share some commonality. There was a dispute between Sudou-kun, Komiya-kun, and Kondou-kun, correct?"

"I wouldn't call it a dispute. Sudou-kun's always picking fights with us."

"'Picking fights'?"

"Sudou's better at basketball than we are, so he's always bragging about it. We practice with everything we've got, but it doesn't exactly feel good when he makes fools out of us. So we often butt heads."

I didn't really know the details of Sudou's club activities, but when I saw the veins popping on his forehead, it was rather obvious that they were lying. Next, Secretary Tachibana spoke to Sudou.

"Not one bit of what Komiya said was true. Those guys are just jealous of my talent. When I practice, they constantly get in my way. That's the truth."

Naturally, both sides claimed that the other party was at fault.

"Both sides have given their grievances, but now we have to come to a judgment with the collected evidence."

"Sudou-kun beat us senseless. It was a one-sided fight."

Class C seemed intent on focusing the discussion on their injuries. The three students did seem to have black-and-blue faces. That was undeniable.

"That's a lie. They attacked first; it was self-defence."

The situation had fallen into an all-out yelling war. Even Kushida had gotten involved, if only to try and calm people down. I guess it was my turn to intervene.

"I have a few questions."

The entire room quieted down at my words. Manabu gave me a nod, signalling that I had the floor.

"Firstly, I noticed a discrepancy in Tachibana's report of the situation."

"You rude first year! Are you saying—"

"I'm not accusing you of anything Tachibana. You mentioned the three of them were members of the basketball club. Where did you get that information?"

Proving this error wouldn't achieve anything but it would hopefully cast enough doubt on the situation.

"That was in the report the Class C boys filed."

"Thank you. I was under the impression that Ishizaki wasn't a member of the basketball club. So why did you claim you were, and why were you with them at the fight?"

"That's... I came as a precaution. There were rumours that Sudou was violent. He's also in better shape than we are, physically. I had to go, didn't I?"

"So, you were invited later, Ishizaki, and Sudou didn't call you out, as you claimed. Meaning you aren't a part of the basketball club. Did you lie in your statement to the school then?"

"Well... not really... it was just easier to say this."

"Are these questions going anywhere. Whether Ishizaki is in the basketball club or not is of little importance compared to whether Sudou beat them up." It seemed Sakagami had decided to take a side and back up his students, rescuing them from peril. I hadn't seen that coming, but it made things much more interesting.

"I didn't beat them up! They started the fight, it was self-defence. They're just a bunch of wimps!"

"The moment that Sudou uttered those words, I saw Sakagami smile.

"Then can it really be considered self-defence when fighting against opponents of such unequal strength?"

"B-but, hey. I was fighting against three people! Three people!"

"But only the Class C students were hurt."

That was the crux of the problem. No matter how many inconsistencies I created in their story, Class C had still suffered from a fight that Sudou was involved in.

"I do have a question about that as well. It was a three on one, yes?"

"Yeah. So?" You need to guard your words more Kondou.

"I heard a rumour that Ishizaki was a bit of a delinquent in middle school." I had received this information from Kushida's network of spies, a very useful fact in this case.

"Ayanokouji, it does you no credit to level unjustified accusations

at people."

"Very true Sakagami-sensei, but in this case it's relevant. I have some knowledge of fighting myself, as does the President. I understand that when you're fighting against multiple enemies, victory becomes exponentially more difficult. So I don't understand how you were defeated so handily, how the fight could be so one-sided, when you had a skilled fighter like Ishizaki-kun with you."

"Because we didn't intend to fight."

"The primary factor in triggering a fight is the collision of the 'energy' between opponents. In the event that you don't have any intention of fighting, or that you're nonviolent, the probability that you'll be hurt should be very low. Especially when there are three of you."

My argument was grounded in evidence and logic, rules and reasonability. Komiya however, fought back with a very obviously scripted response.

"That way of thinking doesn't apply to Sudou-kun. He's exceptionally violent. Even if we were nonviolent, he'd still be mercilessly violent. That's what happened."

He peeled off the gauze that covered his cheek, exposing the scrapes underneath. No matter how many reasonable arguments I made, his injury gave powerful evidence.

"Are you finished with your claims now, Class D?"

"Not at all Manabu." I ignored Tachibana's gasp of outrage at my disrespect, continuing on my train of devastating their arguments. "This situation is highly suspicious. Due to the nature of it, and even though the rumours are unfounded Ishizaki clearly has the body of someone who could fight, I find it very unlikely that the three of you were unable to harm Sudou in any way in a three on one, while being hurt as badly as you were. Which leads me to a specific conclusion."

"Oh? And what would that be?" Sakagami was grinning at me, daring me to try and win the case.

"It was a setup. Class C started the fight, then allowed Sudou to fight back without trying to defend themselves. They provoked the situation in order to trap Sudou and lied about it when reporting the situation."

"Hahaha" Sakagami clapped his hands at my claim. "An outrageous statement Ayanokouji. Students of my class have been injured by an out-of-control boy, and you level such accusations at them? You have no evidence, nothing to back you up yet you claim such a thing. Ridiculous."

"Sensei, I was under the impression that this was a conversation between students, trying to resolve the incident. How are we

supposed to do so if you keep interrupting and fighting their battles for them? The only way that would be reasonable, to have you answer for them, would be if you were at the fight too, so please be quiet while I make my accusations."

Chabashira smirked at my putting down of Sakagami. "He's got you there, Sakagami. Shut up and let the boy talk." Once again, Chabashira took my side. It was extremely helpful to have a teacher aid you, much like Sakagami was attempting to help his own students.

"You also claimed we have no evidence. On the contrary, we do have a witness. One Sakura Airi saw the fight happen and can attest that the situation is as Class D claims, and that Class C are the ones lying."

I dropped the bombshell on the room, that only Kushida, Horikita and I had known.

"W-what?" Komiya seemed shocked at this.

"Is there a problem Komiya-kun? I think it would be great to hear from a witness. Are you saying that hearing the truth would be bad? You didn't lie, did you?" Once again Kushida came in with a devastating blow in a conversation. Her sweet words, mixed with sharp traps allowed for no response but agreement. There was no way to go against her.

"Ayanokouji, if you have a witness then why isn't she here today?" A reasonable question. Manabu had had enough of my running free over everyone and taken back control.

"She's indisposed unfortunately." He looked back at Chabashira, who nodded to confirm my words. Interesting. Chabashira had no idea where Sakura was, and instead was playing along with my plan. "However, I do have photos that she took, in order to prove that she truly was there."

I passed copies of the photos of Sakura to Manabu and the Class C students. After giving them a few moments to recognise the situation, I spoke up again.

"I know this isn't enough evidence to believe us, but it's proof that we do have a witness. I request a recess on the trial, until Sakura is well enough to confirm the story herself." This had been my goal all along. To get an extra day I had asked Sakura to stay home sick.

"Very well. You have one day, Ayanokouji. Tomorrow afternoon, we will reconvene at the same time, and witness or not, judgement will be determined." Manabu had had enough of the trial for the day and ended discussion for now. I had seen him massaging his temples a couple of times, fed up with the childish bickering between students and Sakagami. He really was a pitiful teacher.

Class C and Sakagami left the room, throwing glares at me as

they did. They probably wouldn't take any action against me for this, though, as the trial was still as good as over in their minds. They simply had to wait one more day. Even Ryuuen would caution patience at this point.

"Chabashira, can I speak to you in private?" Both of us knew what this would be about, so she simply nodded and moved to leave. The four of us moved to follow her, Sudou still looking concerned, Kushida looking proud for some reason and Horikita still silent and eyes downcast like they had been for most of the meeting.

"Wait, Ayanokouji. I want a word."

I signalled for the others to go, and once they shut the door behind them Manabu questioned me.

"What are you planning to do?"

"What do you mean?" I asked."

"You planned to get a recess from the very start. It was a rather obvious plan." Of course, Manabu had seen through it. The only reason it worked was because I was dealing with morons from Class C. Against Ryuuen himself, if he had decided to come, the plan would have been much harder to execute.

"True, but I just wanted more time to think. I'm not exactly Zhuge Liang or Kuroda Kanbei. I don't have any plans."

"I don't believe that for a second. You may be unreadable, but I can tell you have no doubts. You know exactly how this case will go."

"Maybe"

We both stood there silently, Tachibana watching from the side.

"I guess we will find out tomorrow them. Off you go, Ayanokouji. Don't disappoint me."

I finally left the student council room and found Ichinose standing with my classmates and Chabashira.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun! How was it, meeting alone with the President?" It seemed she didn't show as much respect to him as most people, or at least was close enough to him to feel comfortable making small jokes.

"It's fine. I need to have a talk with Chabashira about something, so could you all meet me outside in a few minutes? I'm sure you have questions about the trial."

Not waiting for an answer, I moved off with Chabashira, and we made our way down to the faculty room, and eventually into her office, the same one I had found myself in on the first day of school.

"What's this about, Ayanokouji?"

"I think we both know."

I took a seat facing across from her.

"You want to reach Class A."

Chabashira sat there, shock on her face before bursting into laughter.

"You really are incredible Ayanokouji. To figure that out without any help, you really are the best student I've ever seen."

"It was pretty obvious if one pays attention. Sakagami was desperate to help his class, fighting their battle for them despite the school disapproving of such actions, meaning he has some incentive to do so. The only impact could be class points, so I assume teachers are rewarded for how their classes place."

"Go on."

"Despite this, you put little to no effort in, actually hindering our class in your distain for us. You genuinely hate class D yet seem to not care about raising up the classes. You think it's impossible. However, you assisted me today, displaying actions contrary to everything else you've done so far. You lied to the school about Sakura, not knowing why, and trusted me to win the case. You actually care enough to break school rules, more than Sakagami. For the first time since the start of the year, our class had a chance for success, and coincidentally you decided to get involved. To me that seems much too suspicious."

"You're right, Ayanokouji. More than anything, I want to reach Class A, enough to help you at the trial. Now I have a question for you. Will you aim for Class A?"

This was an interesting question. I had put a little thought into it, but never come to a concrete decision about whether I cared. In this moment I decided.

"Yes. I will drag this dysfunctional defect class all the way to Class A. What else is there to do to pass the time?"

"You will unite and lead the class, is that what you're saying?"

"No. I have no intention of doing either." This was contradictory to my previous statement.

"Then..."

"Can I count on your support sensei." This was essential. I believed that she desired to reach Class A more than anything else, more than anyone else. If she really wanted to, I could count on her assistance for support with many different things. "Will you back me up, help me to do things, if necessary, even if they go against the rules."

"You said you wouldn't lead them. So what do you plan to do then?"

"I have no intention of uniting the class. It's much more entertaining the way they are currently. Imagine the confusion when the most dysfunctional class the school has ever seen rises to the top. And it will be a more interesting challenge if Class D is

actively fighting against me, unbeknownst to themselves. I won't be a leader or unite them together, but I will reach Class A."

For the first time in our conversation, Chabashira smiled genuinely.

"If that's the case, then yes. You can count on me Ayanokouji, as long as you work to bring us to Class A. I'll be looking forward to seeing how you drag that rabble along."

Excellent. With Chabashira on my side, there was so much more I could accomplish. And she would probably let it go if I ever berated the class again. I'm sure she would enjoy watching me do so.

"Well, that's all I wanted to talk about. I have other things to deal with now, so thanks for the time, sensei."

"Other things?"

"We still have to win the trial. I'm off to do so."

And with that, I left Chabashira to her thoughts. I still didn't know her motivation behind aiming for Class A and that was something I would have to figure out, in order to estimate how far she would go to help me. It was important to know where her line was, so I didn't cross it and get myself expelled.

I made my way out of the school building. Kushida, Horikita, Sudou and Ichinose were outside waiting for me. Ichinose and Kushida were conversing about nothing and seeing the barely noticeable strain on Kushida's smile I decided to rescue her from the torture.

"Ayanokouji-kun! What were you thinking, mentioning Sakura's name!" Horikita had spotted me, and apparently regained her usual sharp demeanour.

"If it was a mistake, you should have stopped me. I didn't notice you speaking up in there." Horikita had no right to question my actions, after sitting mute for half an hour.

"Hey, don't talk to Horikita that way! She did her best." It seemed that while Sudou had learnt from his previous lesson not to call Horikita her first name, he was still a little blind to her flaws.

"Well... you didn't really talk at all Horikita-san."

"Besides, is it really that big of a deal? They know her name, so what? It's not like they'll do anything about it. Realistically, the evidence Sakura has is circumstantial at best. I just wanted to buy another day."

"So, they really did call a recess until tomorrow." Ichinose had apparently heard most of what happened, but it seemed she hadn't quite believed it until I confirmed the story just then.

"Yes. We have one more day to find some evidence, before Sakura has to testify and the school punishes the guilty party."

"Hmm. Hey, did you know about Sakura when we met at the

special building Kushida-san, Ayanokounji-kun? I saw her leaving just before you did, so did you lie to me?" A playful grin was on her face, but I could tell she was still calculating who I truly was. It was best to play it safe and wait for my guest to arrive.

"Yes. To be honest Ichinose I didn't trust you, so I kept the information hidden. I hope you can forgive me for such a betrayal." It was a reasonable decision to make, and the forgiving smile on her face told me she agreed.

"It's no problem, I probably would have done the same."

"So, what now, Ayanokouji-kun? How do you plan to recover from your mistake?" Horikita took another stab at me.

"Huh? Recover? What do you mean?"

"You messed up, mentioning Sakura. Now we have no leverage. How will you fix that?"

"Actually, I was just going to go spend time with a friend. This case is boring, so good luck to the rest of you."

"Ehh? Ayanokouji-kun you're just leaving us?" Kushida was surprised at this. I had made a big speech about how I would win, so abandoning it now would be unexpected.

"Wait wait Ayanokouji don't leave me! I don't wanna be suspended!"

This was ridiculous, where was she. I needed to get out of this stupid situation.

"Calm down Sudou, I'm sure you'll be fine. You've got Kushida and Horikita to help."

"For the last time I'm not helping!"

"Ne Horikita-san, why did you come today then? I wasn't expecting to see you when you came out." Ichinose to the rescue, interrogating Horikita and Sudou leapt to her defence, giving me a moment with Kushida.

"Are you really just giving up Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Of course not. I've got a plan I need to do now, that they can't know about. It will involve you, so just follow the messages I send when I do."

"Fine. I trust your plan. But why are you still here?"

Just then I heard the sound of rescue. The voice of my freedom and escape from these annoyances.

"It's been a while, kouhai-kun."

Everyone turned to see the new person approaching us. Long platinum hair framed a deadly grin and piercing red eyes.

Kiryuuin Fuuka had arrived to help me with the next part of my plan. Hands on her hips in her signature pose, she gave me a hungry stare.

"Miss me?"

Authors Notes:

Ask and ye shall recieve! Kiryuuin returns next chapter for much needed fun.

On a serious note, I have made the fatal error of reading fanfiction for a different series and now I've been slapped with an inability to write this story properly. Doesn't help I was reading 3rd person, so everything is screwy now. It's fun.

I've always felt the trial was weird in the books, and as far as I can remember Ishizaki is not a member of basketball club. Just feels like even though Horikita was set up as the leader in volume 2 she still really sucks, even more than usual.

As always, hope you enjoy!

Arc 2 Chapter 6 - Just a bit of fun

"Miss me?"

"Sure, why not." It had been a few weeks since I had last had a chance to properly catch up with Kiryuuin, dealing with midterms and Sudou's trial.

"Ayanokouji-kun, who is this?" Everyone with me had a confused expression, even Kushida and Ichinose. Kiryuuin really hadn't made an impact on most students in the school.

"Kiryuuin Fuuka. I've heard a bit about three of you, but I don't see why my kouhai would associate with boring people like you."

"Hey, what gives, don't go calling us boring!" Sudou if you value your male pride, you will stop talking right now.

"Pfft I wouldn't even look at you if it wasn't for kouhai being around you. Even two-face, plaything and disappointment are more interesting than you." It seemed Kiryuuin had given nicknames to the other three people with me. Kushida gave me a questioning glance, to which I responded with a slight head shake. I told her nothing, Kiryuuin was just that good.

"I've heard about you. Kiryuuin-senpai, it's a pleasure to meet you!"

"Yes yes, tell Nagumo I said to leave you alone, you're too cute to break. Now shut up." It seemed even Ichinose's friendly outlook wasn't enough to get through Kiryuuin's disrespect for the ordinary. Ichinose's face had a baffled look on it, but Kiryuuin had already moved on from her.

"Kiryuuin-senpai, I've been trying to meet you for ages, but you keep avoiding me. Could I have your contact?" Kushida instead of trying to be kind went straight to her goal to get the contact of everyone. Unfortunately, Kiryuuin was the one person who's contact she would probably never get.

"If I knew you were this interesting, I would have met you sooner."

"So—"

"That doesn't mean I'll give you my number. You're not that interesting, two-face." Kushida's face fell at this and backed off subdued. Smart. It wouldn't be good to pressure someone who potentially knew her secret, so this was the best choice now.

"Disappointment?"

It seemed Horikita had handled her nickname the worst. She was shaking in rage, or fear perhaps, fists so tight her hands had gone white.

"Obviously. To think President-kun would have such a disappointment of a sister. How sad."

"Eh? Horikita, what's she talking about?" Sudou apparently hadn't caught on to the situation, unlike Ichinose and Kushida.

"Use your eyes Sudou. It's rather obvious she's President Manabu's little sister." I decided to fill the gap in his knowledge, it should annoy Horikita somewhat.

"What! That's so cool, Horikita he's your big brother!" Sudou had an extreme inability to read the room, so to speak.

"Shut up Sudou. And you, what gives you the right to call me that?"

"She's not wrong, Horikita. I remember you talking big, saying you'd solve my problems. What exactly did you do in that trial? I can't remember."

"Grrr" Did she just growl at me? Horikita was unable to respond to my jab, having no support to back her up, besides Sudou.

"Aha, the little sister can't live up to the older brother, I feel bad for him. But I've have enough of these peasants, kouhai. We've got plans now, so long boring friends."

With that Kiryuuin turned and started to move off away from the school, at a slower pace than usual, giving me some time to leave as well.

"Ayanokouji-kun, are you really just going to leave? What about the trial!" Ichinose seemed unable to accept my flippant attitude, disbelieving that I would just give up.

"Like she said, we've got things to do. Do what you want, but don't bother us, or you'll just get caught up in more trouble."

Hopefully warning them would be enough to keep them away for now. I really couldn't be bothered dealing with more people whilst also keeping Kiryuuin under some semblance of control.

"So, who was that girl, kouhai?" I had only just caught up with Kiryuuin when she began to barrage me with questions.

"You mean Kushida? You already know, but it still surprises me just how perceptive you are, Kiryuuin."

"How did you know I was talking about her hmm? And I've said multiple times to call me Fuuka-chan. It's an honour, you know."

"There was only one person there you took a semblance of interest in; it was obvious who you were talking about." I decided not to mention the 'Fuuka-chan' comment. I had never won those arguments.

"Haha fair enough. I see why you like her though, she's

fascinating."

"Yes. She's a very useful pet to have."

"As cruel as ever, kouhai-kun."

As we talked, exchanging banter that almost no one in the school would be able to keep up with, we made our way towards the service road. It was always enjoyable spending time with Kiryuuin. Her attitude was always fun to watch, and she was one of maybe three people I could actually have a decent level of conversation with. It made the mundane days just a little less dull.

"Have you figured out a plan, then?"

"Of course, I have. Don't worry, you're going to love it."

Earlier today, I had sent Kiryuuin a message, asking her to come up with a way to achieve a goal. I told her it didn't matter what happened or how she did it, and as long as it resulted with what I wanted I would participate. This was something she lived for, having a bit of fun, so there was no way she would turn it down.

"So, who's the unlucky soul that's participating?"

"One Kyougo Komiya." After getting his number from Kushida, I forwarded it onto Kiryuuin, before telling Kushida to wait on standby. Her job wasn't over yet.

"Poor boy. What did he do to get on your bad side?" A valid question, since this entire plan was just to toy with him.

"He wouldn't shut up. Isn't that enough?"

"Fair. You promise he won't have my contact by the end of this?"

"As long as your plan works and he doesn't mess up, everything will be fine." It was a valid concern from Kiryuuin, who would never give out her number without good reason, but there shouldn't be a problem.

"Alright, let's get this over with." Kiryuuin sent him a message, and we waited for Komiya to come meet us by the road.

After about 15 minutes, I spotted him running towards where we were.

"You didn't mention how ugly he was. I don't know if I can exist around him without degrading my very existence kouhai."

"Calm down, it won't be for long. And don't lie, you're looking forward to this." It was obvious from the grin on her face. Most people would run in fear upon seeing it, but to me it was a sign of anticipation.

"You know me so well."

Komiya reached us, and while he was clearly exhausted from being so out of shape and running so quickly, he did his best to stand up and look strong.

"A-Ayanokouji, what are you doing here! I have a meeting with Kiryuuin-chan!" I saw Kiryuuin visibly flinch at the honorific, but

luckily Komiya didn't notice.

"Don't worry Komiya, I was the one who called you here."

"Eh? But Kiryuuin-chan messaged me herself! She said she wanted a boyfriend and that I should come quickly!" He actually fell for that. It was sad that someone could be played this easily, but I guess that was the fatal flaw of most high-school boys. They believed getting a girlfriend to be their destiny and didn't question the rare opportunities that came along.

"Kiryuuin has been asking me to set her up with someone for a while now, and when I saw you at the trial, I just knew you were the strong man she had been looking for." A blatant lie, but he would eat that flattery up.

"Y-you're right! I'm really strong, and fast!"

"Well, isn't that good. We have something to do right now, and if you can help, I might be willing to go on a date. Does that sound good, Connard?"

"Eh? Connard?"

"You don't like it? I thought of it myself. I'm sorry..."

"No, I love it, Kiryuuin-chan!" His face went red and I could hear him muttering 'Connard' under his breath over and over.

"Great. Now here's the plan. In about 10 minutes, a truck is going to enter this school, and head down this road. On that truck is a very special shipment, and we're going to steal it."

Kiryuuin had actually planned a highway robbery. I wouldn't expect any less from her.

"Wait, we're stealing something? Isn't that a crime?" Despite setting up a trial to get someone wrongfully punished, Komiya still had some morals. Incredible.

"Oh. I didn't realise you were too scared to help us, Komiya. I'm sorry for calling you all the way out here."

"No, I'm in. I can do this! For Kiryuuin-chan!" Kiryuuin grinned at this, and I smiled internally. He was trapped.

"Great. Then let's get ready." Reaching into the backpack she had been carrying, Kiryuuin pulled out some costumes. Leather jackets and sunglasses. "We have to look the part, right?" She grinned.

I was pretty sure this was nothing like what highway robbers would have worn, but I can't deny her spirit. Kiryuuin would never miss a chance to spice up a situation.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Komiya and I watched from behind some trees near the road as the truck in question approached the target location. Kiryuuin was leaning against a light post, checking something on her phone, when a loud creak was heard throughout the area.

The light post she had been leaning against started to tip, tilting

towards her and the road. Kiryuuin let out a shriek, acting more girly than I had ever seen her, and fled away from it, into the middle of the road. The light post fell directly in front of her, and, as if frozen in fear, Kiryuuin stood there, unmoving, as the truck quickly braked, trying to stop in time.

I had to admire her dedication. Almost getting hit by a truck in order to pull off a prank. While I was sure she could escape, if need be, it was still a risky role to play, and she had pulled it off without hesitation.

The truck driver, seeing a poor maiden almost hit by a lamp post and then a truck frozen in the middle of the road, quickly jumped out and moved over to help her. This was our signal, and Komiya and I began to move, sneaking behind the truck drivers' vision around to the side of the truck.

Kiryuuin, playing her part perfectly, fell into the truck driver, clutching his shirt and pretending to sob in fear. At the same time, she pickpocketed the cargo lock key from his pocket, and tossed it to me, before proceeding to attach herself to him completely.

I unlocked the door and opened it. There were a variety of things inside, this being an all-purpose delivery truck for the smaller stores on campus. Komiya was the one tasked with retrieving the item, and he jumped inside to search for it.

I could hear him rummaging around inside, light from his phone on, as he searched for what we had described to him. I waited outside, keeping watch for anyone who might come by and see something suspicious. This was unlikely, but better safe than sorry. It also worked as an excuse for needing three people for a job that could have clearly been managed by two.

Just when I thought things were taking too long, Komiya jumped out of the truck with a brown paper package in his hands. He stumbled a little on some rocks on the road, but before he could fall and damage the target, I caught him and helped him regain his balance. Passing me the key for the truck, Komiya followed the plan and took off, running as fast as his pathetic legs could carry him towards the densest foliage area on campus.

After I shut the door to the truck, I made my way back around. Kiryuuin had mostly gotten over the trauma apparently and flashed some pleading eyes to come rescue her from the driver.

"Is everything alright here?" I made my way over to the two of them, brushing past the driver's pocket and placing the key back in it without him noticing. "Don't worry dear, it'll be fine, I'm here now." I couldn't say her name out loud, that would be far too incriminating.

Playing the role of 'comforting boyfriend who just happened to be

nearby', I helped the driver move the light post off the road, before waving him on his way. Once he was out of sight, Kiryuuin finally let her act slip, signature grin returning to her face.

"Did it work?"

"Of course, your plan was flawless."

"And Connard?"

"Doesn't know French apparently." Kiryuuin laughed at my joke.

"I'm pretty sure the idiot thought it was a pet name. Connard. How could I have possibly got that from Komiya."

"In any case, Komiya has the package and is running as fast as he can away from any cameras on school grounds."

"And you got his phone?"

"I did. Like most people, he couldn't be bothered changing the default password from his birthday."

It was basically certain at this point that the school intentionally planned for these things. A contacts tracking feature that was enabled by default. Specific locations that for unknown reasons had no cameras. Giving everyone's phone a default password anyone could find out through the contacts app if you were a friend. There were far too many flaws in the system for it to be a coincidence at this point.

"Thank God. I couldn't stand it if he ended up keeping my number."

"Mhm. Even if he kept it, he's going to be expelled tomorrow."

"Hahaha, you really don't care about other people do you kouhai-kun? Expelling someone because they couldn't stop talking."

"It's a means to an end. By the way, what was the package that we stole? You never explained, besides telling Komiya enough about it that he could find it."

Kiryuuin started to laugh at this. Apparently, it was an entertaining situation.

"Believe it or not, Nagumo plays with dolls."

"I'll choose not." Kiryuuin smirked.

"He calls them figurines, or minifigures or whatever. I caught him with them once, when he called me to his room, to get information on you, funnily enough."

"I assume you told him everything?"

"Of course, where would be the fun in keeping him in the dark. But I arrived early and saw them on his desk. I've never seen him so embarrassed."

Now I could see why Kiryuuin found this so funny.

"Normally you can't order things from outside campus, with the whole no-contact rule and whatnot, but being vice president, he can find ways around it. The best part is he can't even report the theft,

since he can't have ordered something in the first place."

Kiryuuin really had created the best plan. A stab at Nagumo, perfectly organising the situation to meet the goal I had requested and also making it extremely fun all at the same time. Her talent really was impeccable.

"Now it's my turn for questions. That's fair since I did all the work right?" Yes, I suppose it was.

"You want to know why I needed his phone?" At her nod, I explained as vaguely as possible. "It's necessary to resolve the trial. Komiya has just angered some people. Foolish boy can't make good choices when messaging." That wasn't quite true, but it would be a good enough explanation.

"Getting expelled from messaging someone, that is a first."

With her curiosity sated, Kiryuuin turned to leave.

"See you around, kouhai-kun. It's always fun, so don't forget about Fuuka-chan!"

Before she had walked too far, I called out to her for one last thing.

"Kiryuuin. Can you ask Nagumo to come to the trial tomorrow, on my behalf. Tell him he's going to enjoy what happens."

"Tell him yourself. I don't want to talk to him more than I have to, and anyway he's so desperate for info on you, he'll definitely go if you ask." Saying this, she forwarded me his contact details before finally leaving for good.

I never felt safe seeing that grin and waited until she was almost out of site back at the school before relaxing completely. The place where the lamp had fallen was quite far away from school, so it would take a while before I could get back. No one should be around to see us though, as there shouldn't be a reason for students to be over here, except on a secret date, like our cover story explained.

Before I could leave however, I had to deal with the hidden Komiya. I was curious to see what we had actually stolen, as I still didn't quite believe that Nagumo collected figurines. It seemed unlikely, just the sort of slander Kiryuuin would spout about anyone, but whatever it was I was sure she didn't lie that it belonged to him. The risk of stealing a legitimate shipment was much higher than an illegal one that couldn't be reported, so I did believe it was his. The real question was how that witch found out about it.

I made it to the grove where Komiya was waiting for me, holding the package in his hand with a very bored and frustrated expression.

"Hey! Where's Fuuka-chan! Why're you alone?" It seemed he'd

moved onto first names without Kiryuuins permission. It was probably best he was expelled tomorrow, because if she ever heard him call her that, he would die in the same second.

"She had to go back with the truck driver to keep up pretences." A believable lie.

"Hmph. Fine, here's the package. Now I gotta go find my phone, I lost it somewhere." Damnit. I had hoped he wouldn't notice, and I could slip it back into his pocket, but it seems the boredom of waiting 15 minutes was too much for his mind to handle without petty entertainment.

"Don't worry, I found it on the way here. It must have fallen out of your pocket while you ran."

"Ah, thanks man. You're not so bad. Sure, you were harsh in the trial, but that was just to stick up for your friend, right?"

"Yeah." What the hell was he talking about? Did he think we were friends or something?

"Aaaa, I can't wait to see Fuuka-chan again!" Oh, I should probably do some damage control for her.

"You know how you've never seen her around campus before?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Kiryuuin's actually really shy. I'm her only friend, that's why she asked for my help. So, if you see her, don't say anything or you might scare her. She said she'd call you on the weekend for a date."

"A date with Fuuka-chan! Ok ok yes yes yes I get it. I wouldn't want to scare my cute girlfriend!"

"Thanks for all your help today. You can head back now."

"Yeah, sure."

With that pathetic excuse of a goodbye, Komiya left the grove, and headed back towards the school as well. Once he was out of range of both sight and sound, I unwrapped the package he had stolen for me. Originally, it had just been a side prize for my main goal, but seeing it now, it actually could be useful. Very useful.

Kiryuuin hadn't been lying. Nagumo really plays with dolls.

Authors Notes:

I had a lot of fun writing this but my god did it take ages to plan. Holy fuck, i spent an entire week trying to figure out just the plot of this chapter. I knew the start point and end point, but jesus everloving bitch slap my brain because I could not figure it out.

It literally took a two hour walk with my dog to get an idea that actually worked before I could write something decent. In the end tho, I'm happy with it because it was fun and new and different.

I reread LN3 today, and its clear as day why people don't like

volume 2 as much, 3 is just so much more interesting. Holy god, things are getting good now. I've finished writing Arc 2, and have started Arc 3 as of today, so fingers crossed I can keep on top of it and my uni work. Managed to balance it so far, and gonna smash out about a bunch of chapters this weekend hopefully so I get a huge buffer.

Either that or i finally watch love is war season 2

Fun fact I just got home to find phone is left on the bus. Currently chasing it with find my iPhone on my iPad while I post this so enjoy chapter while I get to be in a real life car chase. Nothing valuable on it or anything so it's kinda exciting

As always, I hope you enjoyed!

Update on phone if anyone cares I chased it all the way to bus depo and I could see the exact bus across the fence that it's on but they wouldn't let me in the sick bastards so now I get to go to war with city council bureaucrats over an iPhone 5

Arc 2 Chapter 7 - Setup

Ichinose caught up to me on the way to Keyaki Mall. It was lucky that she did, because I didn't want to lose my target by waiting for her.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, wait up!"

I slowed down enough for her to catch me, before increasing to the still rather slow pace of a stalker who didn't want to be noticed.

"Good, you caught me. I didn't want to lose sight of her."

"Her?"

Ichinose took a second to look where I was, and see who's path we were following.

"Sakura-san? Why're you following her Ayanokouji-kun? Don't tell me you're a creepy stalker~" It seemed Ichinose couldn't consider me doing such a thing, going as far as to joke about a serious topic.

"Actually, for today I am. That's why I called you here, to help me."

Many girls would have taken that as a confirmation that I was a pervert, yelling loudly or having some bold reaction. Ichinose however, narrowed her eyes and thought through the potentially criminal situation.

"What's going on, Ayanokouji-kun? And no dodging the question."

"Sakura has looked really worried, stressed all day, more uncomfortable in class than usual. I'm worried something has happened."

As I spoke, Sakura looked around once, not noticing the two of us behind a tree watching and proceeded to walk past the entrance of the mall, heading around to the back.

"So, you're following her to make sure everything's ok, right?"

"Yeah. I couldn't just ask her, since due to her nature she'd probably never tell me under pressure. This is the only way to find out what's going on."

"But why did you call me here?"

"I can't be sure that it isn't someone from Class D who's causing this. Out of everyone in the grade, I evaluate you as the least likely person to target Sakura." It was true out of everyone I knew so far, at least. "But I'm also worried it's about the case."

"Sudou-kuns trial? Ah, because you mentioned her name." Once I mentioned the possibility, Ichinose caught on quickly. "You think

they might be trying to intimidate her into keeping quiet."

"It's possible, which is why I'm following her, to at least try and keep her safe."

Ichinose considered the situation, before nodding with a determined look on her face.

"Alright, I'm in. I'll help you find out what's wrong with Sakura-san."

"Thanks. Now hurry up, or we'll lose her."

There was no chance in hell that Sakura of all people would ever be able to get away from me, but it did me no good to let Ichinose know how talented I was at stalking. I purposely made mistakes as we followed after her, obvious ones Ichinose could notice, but Sakura never saw either of us as she moved towards the back of the mall.

"Ayanokouji-kun, she just went into that alley!"

Sakura had suddenly turned off the footpath and moved into a small alley behind some shops and storage warehouses.

"Could she be meeting someone?"

"It seems likely. Follow my lead, we'll peak around and see what's happening."

Silently, or as silently as an untrained schoolgirl could, we moved to the side of the building. I peered around the corner very slightly, seeing what Sakura was doing in the alley. After determining that it was safe for her to do so, I gestured to Ichinose to also take a look, both of our heads peeking out very slightly, just enough to see what was happening but not enough to be noticed.

Sakura was indeed meeting with someone as I had suspected. It wasn't clear why she was, but from the look on her face, and the way her body wouldn't stop shaking slightly, it was obvious she didn't want to be there.

"Wait, is that... I heard about him, he's the creepy pervert shop owner, isn't he!" It seemed Ichinose had heard the rumours that had been spreading around campus about him.

"Yeah, he is. When I saw him the other day, he couldn't take his eyes off Sakura. I wonder why she'd meet him."

"I don't know, but we gotta- hey Ayanokouji-kun let go. We have to go help Sakura-san."

I had grabbed Ichinose tightly and pulled her back as she moved to go around the corner.

"First of all, be quiet, you're going to get us noticed. Second, nothing has happened yet, so we really don't have the right to interfere."

It was true, and Ichinose knew it, but I could tell she didn't like it. She relaxed her attempts to escape my grip and contented herself

with simply watching for now.

Both of them were quite a way down the alley. It wasn't feasible for the two of us to sneak closer, so we couldn't hear what was being said, but it was obvious something was wrong when the store owner grabbed Sakura and pushed her against the wall.

"!" Ichinose tried to yell out loud at this, and force her way down the alley to stop him, but this time covering her mouth, I once again pulled her back.

"Ichinose. Don't be an idiot and use your brain. We can't stop him, all we can do is watch."

"But Sakura-san, she's in danger!"

"Yes, so do the one thing you can do. Go get campus security, bring them back. I'll stay here and record it, so there's enough evidence to lock him up."

"But—"

It seemed Ichinose couldn't rationalize well in such a situation. It was understandable. As we looked on, Sakura's blouse was torn off, curled up on the ground against the wall, a nightmare scenario to all women in the world. Ichinose must be incredibly sympathetic to Sakura's plight right now, impacting her cognitive functions. It was left to me to handle the situation.

"Go, as fast as you can. If it gets worse, I'll try and stop him."

"But... Ok, Ayanokouji-kun, I trust you."

With that, Ichinose turned and ran off towards the security station in the mall. In event of an emergency, there was a number that every phone had pre-programmed in for students to call, but it seemed Ichinose had forgotten that, and I wasn't going to remind her.

No, Sakura was going to suffer for as long as possible.

I estimated it would take Ichinose about thirty seconds at her current speed to get to the security stall, another 30 for any guards or policemen to be mobilized and return here to catch him. That gave me a good 40 seconds to wait and allow the situation to escalate as far as possible. To pass the time, I took out my phone and started filming, like I told Ichinose I would.

As I waited, I watched the situation unfurl from around the corner. The store owner had pulled Sakura up, groping her breasts as his licked his lips. His pants had reached his ankles, a noticeable bulge growing in his underpants. and it was at this point I decided the situation had gone on long enough.

"Now what depraved act could possibly be occurring here?"

I made my way down the alley, sneaking up behind them both before introducing myself into the situation.

The store clerk turned, shocked at hearing another person, and

upon seeing me standing behind him, dropped Sakura, shock and fear rippling over his face.

"You!"

"Me."

I threw a lightning-fast jab into his jaw, throwing him back across the alley to collapse against a wall, much like Sakura had been only moments ago. I was fairly certain I heard his jaw shatter as I did so. Oh well. It wasn't like the school would punish me for this.

Not giving him a moment of respite, I launched forward with a deadly kick into his ribs, breaking one or two of them as I did so. He curled up into himself as I did so over and over again in the same spot. His cries for me to stop had turned to whimpers of pain, simply struggling to get through the situation alive.

From not far away I could hear pounding footsteps, along with Ichinose's voice shouting nonsense, so I decided it was time to end it. I gave him one final kick in the face, breaking his nose, before abandoning the would-be rapist on the ground and turning to Sakura.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun..."

All that was in her eyes was fear and tears. Both of the clerk, and me. She moved slightly away from me, and I realized I had let my true eyes out during the fight, if you could even call it that.

"Here." I took off my school blazer and passed it to Sakura, allowing her to cover up her half naked body. She curled up inside it, pulling away from me and I moved back as well, taking out the store clerks' phone from his pocket.

The school security finally arrived in the alley, followed by Ichinose, to find the situation over. Reading the environment, most of the security members moved over to the unconscious man on the ground, that Ichinose had identified to them as the pervert, and pulled him up, carrying him away to the small holding cell the school had. I had spent a few hours there with Kiryuuin once before they let us go since there wasn't any evidence. It wasn't a very comfortable place to be.

The of the two remaining officers, one stood at the entrance to the alley, while the other moved over to Sakura to talk to her. I gave a quick gesture to the lady to sidebar and asked if I could be the one to talk to Sakura. A familiar face would be beneficial in such a situation, and Ichinose and the security officer both agreed with me.

"Sakura."

For the first time since I gave her the blazer, she looked up.

"Oh... Ayanokouji-kun."

This was a difficult situation. I only had one real chance to get

what I wanted, and if I bungled it, by pressuring her too much or asking stupid questions like 'are you ok', it would be problematic to say the least.

It was a fine line to walk, but I had to try.

"Sakura, was this what had been bothering you all day." Her eyes widened in shock at that, but I continued before she could stutter at me. "I noticed it in class. You haven't been yourself, so Ichinose and I decided to follow you and see what was wrong."

"Eh, y-you noticed."

"Of course."

I gave her a few more moments before continuing with my questioning. I felt like the tension between the two of us was at an acceptable level to prod a little further.

"Why did you come here Sakura?"

Where she was previously shaking, eyes darting around, now she sat frozen, staring right at me.

"We need to know, Sakura, so we can punish whoever did this."

"It was Komiya-kun," she confessed in a whisper.

"What about Komiya?"

"He sent me a message. He said to come here at lunch, or he would expose my secret."

"Your secret?"

Sakura nodded her head frantically at this, but kept her mouth shut. Obviously, her secret, which was probably her identity as Shizuku, was her most guarded secret. She wouldn't tell it to anyone she wasn't supremely close to, especially after an incident such as this, where someone had just used it against her.

"Don't worry I won't ask what it is." She calmed down slightly at this, but still sat frozen under the blazer, tears non-stop dripping down her face behind the cracked glasses Ichinose had retrieved for her.

"Can I see the messages?" Silently acquiescing, Sakura passed me her unlocked phone, showing me the messages Komiya had sent her. It was exactly as she said, a threat to get her to come here. I took quick screenshots of all the messages, before sending them to my phone.

"Is-is that all, Ayanokouji-kun?" Sakura was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. The fact that she had lasted this long without her mind collapsing under my questioning astounded me

"That's all. Thank you, Sakura-san. I will make sure that Komiya is punished for this."

I stood up, and gestured for the security officer to move over and take care of Sakura. Ichinose also took the opportunity, and knelt down in front of her, working her gentle magic with a smile on her

face. It seemed to be working, and my precense was no longer necessary, so I made my way towards the exit of the alley.

"Ayanokouji-kun, where are you going!" Ichinose called out to me.

"This isn't over Ichinose. I still have a few things to do. I trust you to take care of Sakura, and in any case, I don't think she wants me around her for much longer."

The fear of my actions, while not as scary was what the clerk had done to her, was still prevalent in her eyes. I wasn't someone she wanted around, and giving her space was a good excuse for me to make a phone call.

Once I was out of hearing range from the others, I quickly found the contact I had been looking for.

"Chabashira. You said you'd be willing to help me out. I need you to get something for me."

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

The members of the Sudou trial reconvened that afternoon at 4pm once again. This time however, there was a very different vibe in the room.

The three boys from Class C are the same as ever, along with Kushida and Sudou, the five of whom apparently hadn't heard about the incident. Horikita had decided not to come along, to avoid the same humiliation she received last time.

The teachers and student council members in attendance, however, were a completely different story. Stony faces, no nonsense attitudes. Komiya had tried to make a joke earlier and his own teacher Sakagami had told him to shut up.

"Right, everyone's here. I don't want to spend—"

Manabus speech, probably about getting this over and done with so they could deal with Sakura's issue was interrupted by the door of the student council quarters opening, and a blonde-haired student walked in.

"Sorry I'm late, President."

Manabu seemed shocked to see who had come in.

"Nagumo. I'm surprised to see you here."

"It's the Vice-Presidents job to sort out disputes, isn't it? Besides, I was told today was going to be very interesting." He gave me a sharp glance with a vicious grin, before sitting down next to Manabu. I could tell the president picked up on the look he gave me, based on the look Manabu gave me right after.

But despite his perceptive nature, he still didn't notice Tachibana fuming that Nagumo could sit beside him, and she couldn't.

"As I was saying, we have a much more important issue to deal with. I won't say what it is, just that the severity of it overshadows

this case phenomenally. I have no interest in dragging this out any further, so we will be finishing this up as fast as we can."

A wise choice. I had been expecting Manabu to do such a thing, since a fight between delinquents was nothing compared to an attempted rape.

"If anyone has any new evidence they would like to present, now is the time. Otherwise, I shall render judgement on both parties proportional to the situation."

"Hey what do you mean by both parties!" Ishizaki spoke up in confusion at Manabu's words.

"Despite Sakura being unable to testify, the images she took on her camera are evidence that both sides were fighting. This indicates that the students in Class C lied about the situation."

"Like I said, it's their fault, I'm innocent."

"However, Sudou also fought back. Both sides are guilty. Is there any evidence against this."

This was the moment I had been waiting for. The only question was if I could spin the story to make Sudou innocent.

"I'd like to speak."

"You have evidence, Ayanokouji?"

"Not so much evidence, but I'd like to tell a story that will resolve this situation."

"We don't have time for a long-winded tale, we have more pressing matters to deal with."

"Actually, I think you'll find Sakura's rape is connected to this very situation."

The room froze at my claim. No one who knew about the second event would suspect it be connected to this boring one.

"Oh? Do tell, Ayanokouji, I'm very curious about this." The only person not phased in any way was Nagumo, who unlike everyone else leaned forward, his smile sharpening as he smelt a very interesting turn of events.

Time for a monologue.

"Yesterday at the trial, I mentioned we had a witness to Sudou's case. I provided evidence that someone was there and told everyone her name was Sakura Airi. I had told no one else about it, meaning that at that time, the only people who knew were in the room with us."

This was a key point. No one else could have known unless one of the people here leaked it, making everyone here suspicious.

"What are you trying to suggest Ayanokouji? I hope you aren't going to be slandering my students with lies again."

"Respectfully, Sakagami, shut up. Let my student speak." Chabashira took my side, just like he took his students.

"I'm getting to that, so let me speak." That shut him up. "At lunch time today, Sakura met with the clerk for the electronics store in Keyaki mall, where he attempted to rape her. I was there during the incident, and once it was resolved, she confessed to me that she had been threatened by someone with exposure of her secret, if she didn't go there to meet with him."

"So, the clerk learnt her secret and blackmailed her." An obvious conclusion Manabu, but far too simplistic, I expected better of you.

"No, that was the surprising thing. Sakura showed me her phone, and the unknown number who messaged her. I have screenshots of the messages right now."

Reaching into my bad, I pulled out the first wad of paper I had in there, with a copy of the messages for everyone to read.

"This is indeed a serious matter. Are you suspecting that one of the people here of sending the threatening messages?" Manabu's question caused outrage from the students in Class C.

"This is ridiculous, we didn't do anything!"

"You expect us to believe this, it's bullshit!"

"Ayanokouji, these unfounded claims are absurd. Please be quiet and let adults handle this severe matter."

Ah, Sakagami, you really are obstinate. Learn when to stop fighting, or go down in flames.

"True, this could all be made up. So I had Chabashira access the student phone records, in order to confirm the numbers were the same."

"You can't do that, Ayanokouji! That's private information!" It seemed Komiya had recognised the number as his, and was trying to discredit what I had done. Unfortunately, it's too late.

"Chabashira, can you confirm these messages as legitimate?"

"Yes student council president."

The room went quiet again, all outbursts from Class C and Sudou had stopped.

"After confirming that fact, I felt justified in asking for all the messages from that number in the student database."

That was an illegal act I had done.

"Ayanokouji, you understand how serious this is. You have broken a law in order to find out if this was the culprit. If it turns out you're wrong, there will be consequences." Manabu was warning me to tread lightly here. One wrong move could spell my own expulsion.

But it was that tightrope of danger that made it fun.

"I never asked for the identity of the student who's number it was. I wasn't willing to break privacy that much, so I will leave it up to the school. But at the same time that the unknown person messaged

Sakura, they also messaged two other people.

"One, the store clerk. The number can be found very easily on the store's website, and I checked that myself. The person offered them a 'cute girl all for themselves'. I, like many others have heard the rumours about this particular clerk being a creepy pervert, so I assume that's why they turned to him."

I passed out documents once again, printed out copies of the text conversation between the unknown student and the store clerk. Almost everyone in the room had a disgusted look on their face whilst reading them.

"It's clearly not a respectful or legal conversation, so that alone should be evidence of the unknown students intentions."

"You keep saying the word 'student'. How can you be sure that it was one?" Thank you Nagumo for setting up my final step.

"Because of the third person they messaged. Actually, the third number was the first person they messaged. They asked for Sakura's phone number, under the guise of wanting to confess to her. It's a rather disgusting way of getting a contact, but it worked."

I could see people's brains moving, especially Kushida. Her sudden look of shock, which would be taken by everyone else a different way soon, was to me confirmation she had figured out my plan. She quickly glanced over to me, horror in her eyes as she realised what had happened. I'm sorry, Kushida. It may hurt your status, but you were useful to me.

"This in itself isn't evidence that the person is a student."

"Obviously not. However, I recognised the third number. I know the person who owns it, and they just so happen to be in this room right now."

I paused, everyone taking a small breath instinctively, in anticipation.

"Kushida, who was it that messaged you at 4:53pm yesterday afternoon asking for Sakura's number."

Everyone went quiet. All eyes were on Kushida, who's head had tilted down, tears in her eyes. Then she whispered, almost imperceptibly, the person's name.

"Komiya-kun, why..."

"Ehhh? Kushida-chan, why did you say my name!"

"Komiya-kun, you asked me yesterday for her number, at that time. So why... I thought I could trust you..."

Falling into sobs and hiccups at having been partially responsible for the crime, Kushida simply took out her phone and showed everyone her message history.

"Komiya, you heard that Sakura was a witness. That could bring to light the lie you told to incriminate Sudou. You had to fix the

situation. Luckily, you heard a rumour about a pervert podophile store owner. It was a simple solution. You found out that she was an Idol, her greatest secret, and used it to blackmail her into getting raped. In your mind that would stop her from testifying, and you would get away with punishing Sudou."

"No! I never—"

"Unfortunately for you, you didn't know that deleting messages didn't delete them from the schools' records. Evidence of your actions was recorded in the system. I accuse you of framing Sudou and planning the rape of Sakura Airi."

"It's lies! It's all lies! I never did any of it!"

Komiya seemed to realise the situation he was in. Irrefutable evidence from his own phone, means and motive. All that was left was opportunity.

Luckily, everyone else had remained silent and allowed me to continue my verbal battering ram.

"If you didn't do it then, where were you at 4:53pm yesterday. Do you have an alibi?"

This was the final piece of the trap I had set. At that time yesterday, Komiya had been hiding in a grove of trees waiting for me with an illegal object. There was no way he would admit to robbing a truck to get out of what he believed to be a lie.

"I was with you!"

That was true, but I also had an alibi.

"No you weren't. I was out with Kiryuuin at the time, and neither of us ever ran into you. Kushida saw us leave half an hour before that."

"It's true, Ayanokouji-kun was with Kiryuuin-san just before." Kushida got enough courage to speak up again.

"Well, this all seems pretty clear to me. Thanks for inviting me along Ayanokouji, you were right, this would be interesting." Nagumo threw me a grin as thanks for entertaining him for a day.

"Nagumo, as Vice-President this is your job. You don't need an invite... In any case, Komiya. Do you have anything to say in your defence?"

Komiya looked up at Sakagami for help, but even he couldn't rescue this situation, and turned his head to look away.

"The only question is, whether Ishizaki and Kondou helped him."

"Huh?!"

"What are you talking about?!"

Chaos returned to the room at my question.

"You three were involved with the first incident. It would make sense that you all worked together with this one too."

"I must agree with Ayanokouji on this. Ishizaki, Kondou. Did you

help Komiya with his planned rape?"

Once again Komiya pronounced his innocence, but everyone ignored him. It seemed that everyone in the room had collectively agreed he was guilty.

Ishizaki and Kondou gave each other a look, before collectively agreeing to resign their pleas. They were smarter than I had thought, recognising it would be best to save themselves in this situation.

"We did it, the thing with Sudou. It was a trap and setup to frame him, we admit it ok! But Kondou and I had nothing to do with Sakura, I swear!"

"Yeah, we framed Sudou, but we didn't want anything to do with Sakura, promise!"

It was a very childish confession, but in any case, it worked.

"Ok. I believe them. What about everyone else? Manabu, Nagumo, Chabashira, Sakagami?"

"Can we just get this over with?" Nagumo was clearly done with this whole trial.

"It seems clear what happened to me. Right Sakagami?"

"I suppose so, Chabashira. Punish them as you see fit, President."

There it was. My victory, from the jaws of defeat.

"Very well. Ishizak and Kondou. For lying to the school and staging a fight to frame another student, both of you will be suspended for one week."

Both of them nodded meekly, probably accepting that this was the best outcome for both of them.

"Komiya. For what you have done, you are henceforth expelled from ANHS, and will find yourself answering to the full power of Japanese law. 50 Class Points will be transferred to Class D from C as compensation as well. It's not much in perspective to the situation, but it's the standard response from the school for cross-class crimes."

50 Class Points huh? Interesting.

"No..."

Komiya fell to his knees on the floor, having lost the strength in his legs to hold him up while shouting any longer.

"Pathetic. A real man would admit to his crime and accept the punishment. What a coward." You could always rely on Nagumo to bully someone who was down.

"You bitch!"

At the insult from Nagumo, Komiya seemed to gain some strength back. Fueled by his anger, he launched himself across at the Class D students. I couldn't tell if he was aiming for me or Kushida, probably suspecting her as part of the setup, but I couldn't let him

hurt her.

I grabbed Komiya out of the air and dropped him onto the ground, hard.

"Don't do anything stupid. Your time here is done."

Nagumo clapped and laughed at my actions. How he got on the student council without being able to take anything seriously baffled me.

"That concludes everything we had planned for today. Sakagami, take your student to the head office, where he will be properly dealt with. The rest of you, bar Ayanokouji may leave."

The Class C students followed after Sakagami without a fuss, eyes down as they accepted their utter defeat. Sudou, who had been surprisingly quiet since I started to relate Sakura's rape, which he had heard nothing about to his situation also followed after him. I could tell from his subdued nature he was questioning whether it was his fault in some way. This was a prime chance to talk with him, so hopefully he would stick around.

Kushida was the most interesting one. For the last few minutes she had been crying softly, face pale and shaky to stand. She took a moment to recompose herself, taking a deep breath and pulling herself back together before moving to leave. As she did, she gave me a long stare.

'Explain everything tonight' was roughly what I thought it meant. This would be interesting as a test of trust. Kushida, do you really side with me?

After Chabashira, and Tachibana at Manabu's urging, followed her out, I was left in the room with Nagumo and Manabu alone.

"First of all, congratulations Ayanokouji, for solving the case. Impressive work."

"I must agree, President. You did a fabulous job, incredibly entertaining."

"Nagumo, this is serious." Manabu didn't seem to have time for Nagumo's antics.

"I couldn't let this go unpunished. It also happened to benefit Sudou's case, so it all worked out in the end."

I wonder if Manabu would pick up on my actions.

"I do wonder, did you intend for something like this to happen when you mentioned Sakura's name yesterday? It seemed like a mistake at the time, unless you were expecting a result such as this."

So, he did notice my mistake.

"Yes, you're right. I was expecting Class C to make a move after hearing there was a witness, but not to this scale. It was lucky I had been following Sakura to see if such a thing happened, or who knows what might have happened."

"You played a dangerous game, Ayanokouji. Much longer and things could have been even worse. Sakura has decided to drop out of school as a result of the incident. I hope you understand the consequences of using others as bait now."

So, she dropped out, huh? I wasn't expecting such an extreme reaction, but she was a very meek person. It would make sense she would want to escape the environment where such a traumatic event occurred.

"You're as ruthless as me, Ayanokouji. I can't wait to be entertained by you. I thought once the President was gone I'd be all alone, but not as long as you're here. Try not to get expelled."

"How's your new toy Nagumo? Or have you not got it yet." Now was a good chance to needle him a bit, as well as give him a threat. Manabu shouldn't be able to understand what we're talking about.

"So it was you..."

"Don't worry, I'll try not to break it too much. Or should I say her?"

I issued my challenge to him. Manabu was looking between us confused, but decided to move past it since he didn't understand.

"One last thing Ayanokouji. While I can't condone the persons actions, it seems no one is able to remember the name of the person who injured the pervert, and it's missing from the incident report. You wouldn't happen to know who it was, would you?"

This was the schools' thanks for my actions. They would ignore the injuries I inflicted onto the store clerk, as the only way of thanking me they had.

"No, unfortunately I can't remember."

"Mmm, as I thought, nobody knows. Well, that's all Ayanokouji. You may go now."

Manabu looked as if he wanted to ask something else but held himself back for some reason. I had no idea what it could be.

Everything had gone exactly as planned. Now there were only two conversations I had to have, before the entire situation was over.

Thank you Ryuuen, for your little game.

Authors Notes

First up, holy fuck. I never expected to write something like that when i started writing this, but here we are. I know its not even close to bad compared to some of the stuff on the internet, but i still felt sick planning it out and then writing it.

If anyone knows wattpads guidelines on what constitutes a mature story, let me know because it seems pretty vague to me. If it needs it ill mark it but i feel like that would kill the algorithm

slightly so I don't want to jump the gun if I don't need to.

This was my first time coming up with an original-ish plot, so what did people think? If you still don't understand, that's fine, it's explained soon. It could definitely be because i already know the details it's obvious, so i have no clue how obvious his plan is.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed (not too much), see you in two days!

Arc 2 Chapter 8 - Semesters End

Once I left the student council room, I found Sudou waiting outside for me. I hadn't been expecting him here, so I was curious to see what he was going to say.

"Hey Ayanokouji, wait up."

"What do you want Sudou." It was strange to see him waiting here, and so humble and quiet too. I had expected him to run off with Ike and Yamauchi to celebrate, but it seemed this incident had helped him grow somewhat.

"I just wanted to say thanks. You helped me a lot here, and it's thanks to you that I didn't get in trouble."

"It was fun. That's the only reason I helped, Sudou, so remember that. Don't expect my help again, so use your head next time."

"I know. It was my fault the situation happened, and because of that Sakura... well, thanks bro."

"Do you understand what Horikita was trying to teach you now?"

"Eh? Trying to teach me? I thought she was just being stubborn. That's so like her."

It seemed Sudou hadn't recognised the lesson she was teaching him, or that he had learnt it. He also didn't see her refusal to help as a detriment to her character. He really was infatuated with her.

"She wanted you to be punished."

That shocked him.

"W-why would she want that! I thought I was her friend?" Oh, you sweet innocent child

"Sudou, I don't think there's anyone Horikita thinks is her friend. That said, she was trying to help you in her own way."

"Help me?"

"She wanted you to learn to control your anger, and having you be punished for your actions was the best course of action to her."

The mollified expression on his face showed his understanding.

"Oh, yeah. I suppose it did work, sort of. I never should have doubted her."

His faith in her was unreal.

"Anyway, later bro. I'll see you around!" Having apologised, Sudou regained some of his previous cheer.

I watched as he headed off from the school building, probably to finally meet up with his friends.

To be honest, I hadn't expected that from him. It was an incredible change to see, though I suppose someone almost getting raped because of him, as I had framed it in his mind, was enough of a motivator to fix his psyche a little.

Also, please don't call me bro. We aren't friends.

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The night after the final trial, Kushida returned to my room again. She quickly slipped in through the door, using the key I had given her for convenience, but with none of the usual presence she normally carried. Neither the kind caring friend to all, nor the evil bitch queen on the grade were in my room tonight, just a subdued and even slightly nervous Kushida.

"Good evening, Kushida."

"Hey."

That was especially unusual. I couldn't tell what was going through her mind, but she was obviously stuck on something important. I suspect it had to do with what happened in today's events.

I had considered it earlier, and decided that if she asked for it, I would give her an explanation. The transparency I could show by revealing all my actions would go a long way to gaining her support and removing any last barriers in her mind that I was holding things back. It would show her just what I was truly capable of, hopefully scaring her, but also make her more likely to believe and support me.

It would also be a good test to see how much I could trust her.

"Would you like some dinner? I've just finished cooking."

I had expected her arrival and had planned for it by making a larger meal than usual.

"Sure, I could eat."

There it was again, that hesitancy, and subdued nature she had been expressing tonight. The normal Kushida, or at least the one I had had over for dinner before would have made some bold exclamations, before leveling a harmless insult towards me which would turn into slight banter.

This Kushida was completely different.

After a rather quiet meal, I got up and took the plates back to the kitchen, before returning and heading towards the bed as usual, ready for her complaints. So it was somewhat surprising however, when she remained where she was, looking downwards, as if completely disconnected from the situation.

"Kushida!" I gave a snap in her direction, and her head shot up, dragged out of her contemplation.

"Oh, right! Hehehe, silly me getting distracted."

Interesting, she had reverted to her fake self, the one she showed everyone outside of this room. The false Kushida had replaced her anxieties almost instantly, almost instinctively as if a defence mechanism. I had always thought it was a meticulously controlled set of actions and emotions, but perhaps she had been acting that way for so long it had become instinctive. It would certainly make sense, since in any situation where she got distracted, she would need to keep up the facade.

In that sense, the angel girl was as much the real Kushida as the cold-hearted witch.

"What's wrong? I can tell something is bothering you."

"Well, I wanted to know... how did you do it?"

"Do what?" This was a critical moment, and I had to be absolutely perfect in my actions.

"How did you frame Komiya?"

Very well, she would be getting an explanation. But first...

"Take out your phone. I won't risk this conversation being recorded. It's a very serious topic."

"Obviously. I don't want to get in any trouble."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone, placing it on the table face up. From where I was, I could see the screen, showing no recording was currently on going. Once that was done, Kushida stood up and moved over to the bed as usual, sitting down and leaning her back against mine.

I could feel her hair tickling my neck, and the slight rise and fall as she breathed, waiting for my explanation. It was a slightly uncomfortable position, as she let all her body weight fall directly on me, but I wasn't too bothered by it. If she was comfortable, I didn't mind.

Huh. I hadn't thought about that before. Interesting.

"So?"

She was determined to get an explanation, so I had to figure out where to start. It was a convoluted situation, as explaining chronologically would lead to lots of other side stories, but there was no better way to do so.

"You remember during the first trial, I mentioned Sakura's name."

"Yeah. Horikita got pretty upset about it. As if she could complain, the useless bitch didn't say a thing."

"It was easy to see why she was upset. Dropping the name of our witness without them being there was a mistake to her, but it was actually a bait."

"A bait? But they didn't do anything to her."

"No, but it gave me the excuse that they would. If they had lied, the most important thing to do would be to crush a witness, so any

action against Sakura in the next day could be pinned on them pretty easily."

They would already be the most suspicious people in the situation. I was certain Ryuuen would have advised them to do nothing in order to avoid such a situation, because it was the only way they could have any implications made against them.

"So that's why you told me to reply to messages."

"Yes."

Right after I had left with Kiryuuin, I sent a message to Kushida telling her to respond to any messages from Komiya in as helpful manner as possible. That meant that when she had got a message from him asking for Sakura's phone number under the pretence of love, even though she obviously must have found it suspicious, she still passed it on.

"But why did he ask me that? It's so weird that you knew he would."

"Actually, he didn't. It was just his phone that did."

"You stole his phone?"

"And with it sealed his doom. Komiya had no defence from the stolen phone, since he couldn't say what he had been doing at the time. Even if he did, there was no evidence that the truck got robbed in the first place. All that happened was a light fell down and the truck stopped for a while, with an illegal shipment disappearing at the same time. There wasn't anything to report so he couldn't use it as an excuse."

"Wait hold on, you robbed a truck?!"

"Yeah. Kiryuuin, Komiya and I robbed a truck, which gave me a chance to steal his phone without him noticing."

"Explain the whole truck heist, I'm still confused."

"No, perhaps another time. It's not particularly relevant, and was just for fun, mostly."

I could feel her grumbling under her breath, as she shifted into a more comfortable position against my back.

"So, what happened next."

"It actually involves the rumour I had you spread."

"The one about the store clerk?"

"The very same."

The night after Kushida, Sakura and I went to the electronics shop, I had Kushida spread a rumour that he was a perverted pedophile. I had justified it to her by claiming it was just to protect Sakura and other girls from him, but in actuality, it was to provide 'Komiya' with a motive.

"Using Komiya's phone, I sent a message to the clerk, telling him I had a student he would like to meet. I sent him a picture of Sakura,

and the clerk was really thankful for my offer."

"OFFER! Disgusting pigs, treating Sakura like an object. Yeah, she's fucking annoying to deal with but she doesn't deserve that." Was that empathy from Kushida? I had to be misreading the situation.

"In any case, once that was done, 'Komiya' blackmailed Sakura with her secret idol personality into meeting him behind the mall. I followed her there the next day with Ichinose, providing me with an alibi, before rescuing her after letting him have his way with her for a while."

"You..."

Ah, Kushida had stiffened at that last part.

"Yes, it was important the situation grew into such a terrible one. I could have saved her earlier, but then the consequences might not have been so severe, and judgement so swift. I needed it to be as bad as possible, so that the other two Class C students could flip on him and clear Sudou's name."

"You did all that... just to save Sudou."

Kushida didn't seem to be able to believe my actions or my reasoning.

"I would have liked for it to go on for longer, but Ichinose interrupted with security before anything serious could happen, so I was forced to take action. Once that was done, I asked Chabashira for the phone records and the rest was as you saw in the trial today."

Kushida was silent for a while, processing what I had said. It was understandable. Everything about the plan was incredibly cold, calculating and without regard for anyone else. It traumatised one person, and got criminal charges placed on another two.

It was about five minutes of silence before she spoke up.

"Would you have let her..."

"Get raped? Probably. The worse the situation was for Sakura, the better it was for our class. In fact, we probably would have gotten more class points, if not for Ichinose."

"Is that all you care about? More class points?"

My actions were beyond the comprehension for an ordinary person, even one as twisted as Kushida. They caused more harm than good, and if asked about the way to save him, Sudou probably would have rather been punished than subject Sakura to such a horrendous event.

"I told you, Kushida. I would win. Despite having nothing, I would come out on top. And I always will. No matter what I have to sacrifice, I will win. Whatever it takes."

I felt the area behind me grow cool as she stood up from the bed

and moved away from me, taking a seat in a chair next to my bed. I turned to face her, since she deserved at least that much respect from me.

"You're horrible, Ayanokouji."

"I suppose I am."

"Sakura will have to deal with the trauma for the rest of her life. Even though I hate her, she didn't deserve that."

"What about the other two. They're face serious criminal charges for their actions, one of which is innocent."

"You know I don't care about that. I tried the same thing on you, remember?" Her face went slightly red at the memory of her forcing me to grope her breast.

It was true, she probably didn't care in the slightest about Komiya or the clerk. No the problem here was something else.

"Would you do the same to me?"

It came out in a whisper, from a white and terrified face. That was it. The reason Kushida had been avoiding me all day, and so scared the whole time she was here.

I essentially held her life in my hands. I could order her to do whatever I wanted, and there was virtually nothing she could do to stop me, since doing so would end her social life in this school. She was terrified that she would be forced to pick between getting raped under orders, or losing the thing she cared about most, the feeling she was addicted to.

I felt like she didn't actually about care what happened to Sakura. It was heartless, especially for a woman, but Kushida genuinely didn't care about other people, much like myself. She could probably walk past a dying person without flinching, in fact she would probably throw an insult at them instead. No, the reason she seemed to care was because she wanted to know how far I was willing to go, how she would be used.

And after consideration, the answer surprised me.

"Surprisingly, no."

"Eh? Surprisingly?"

At my answer, her face had regained some colour, her energy returned to somewhat her former level.

"It shocked me to realise this, but there actually are lines I wouldn't cross with you. Huh."

"Don't take this so casually! This is my life you're talking about!"

"Before coming to this school, I would have done anything necessary for my own benefit. But it seems I now have limits to what I would do to you."

This was another development I hadn't been expecting. I had made a point to watch how I felt about Kushida, in order to not

impact my judgement and reasoning, but apparently I had missed that I felt slightly protective of her.

"I told you, didn't I? On the rooftop. You're mine. And I'm not going to sacrifice you that easily for a victory."

I wanted to tell her it was exclusively because of her usefulness, but that in and of itself wouldn't be completely true. I seemed to care, even just slightly, about her.

"Oh. Well, in that case, I suppose its ok then."

It's ok to get someone else raped, as long as she wasn't? There's no logic to this woman.

"Don't get confused. You still have to follow my orders. Just remember what I told you, my promise. I'm on your side, and I want to help you."

"Yeah, I know, it's just..."

She took a breath before continuing.

"You scared me, for a bit. You sacrificed three people, to save one. It didn't make sense, and I was scared you'd do the same to me."

She trailed off at the end into a mumble that I couldn't quite here, but I got the gist of what she was saying. I held out an arm to my side, giving a gesture, and she moved back over to the bed.

Kushida sat down beside me again, and I wrapped her shoulders in a one-armed hug. I could see her face turning red again, at the intimate action, but it was necessary to show some affection towards her after my words, to justify my claim that I was looking out for her.

If she got through this successfully and stayed by my side willingly, I suspect the last barriers between us would drop, and she might come to trust me. And perhaps then I could come to trust her.

"I didn't do it to save one, though?"

"Huh? But you were saving Sudou."

"No, I wasn't. I was trying to win. Saving Sudou was just the by-product. I couldn't care less about him."

"Ehehe." She gave a weak laugh at that. "You really are evil. Doing everything for yourself like that, who could ever side with you."

She leaned into my hug slightly, resting her head on my shoulder. It was unfortunate that this was probably an act. Kushida was an incredible actress, fooling almost an entire school, but I did hope some of how she was tonight was legitimate.

I would like it if she did care for me and wanted to side with me. That was another realization I had just made tonight. A desire for her to be by my side, in what capacity I was not yet sure, was something I had. Kushida had broken down my walls, very slightly,

and carved out a small alcove in my life that I wanted to protect.

It was a shame I had to crush that now.

"Hopefully you, if you can bring yourself to stop recording me."

I felt her tense against me slightly as I said that. She was a great actor, but even the slightest bodily changes could give you away, even unconsciously.

"What are you talking about, my phone's on the table."

"That's not your phone. The case might be the same, but you pulled it out of your left pocket. You keep your phone in your right. It's currently recording this conversation as leverage."

She gave a mirthless laugh at my accusation.

"I can't get anything past you, can I."

"Don't even bother trying. I'll let you keep the recording, though, if it makes you comfortable."

I could feel the frown on her face as I said this.

"Why would you do that? I could betray you at any time."

"True, but in turn I would release my own recording. Both of us would go down together. Sure, I'd probably go to prison and lose my freedom, the thing I care about most in the world. But you would lose the love of others, the thing you love most. We would both crash burning together."

"Sounds romantic."

"Sounds problematic. But keep the recording, I don't mind."

Really, I didn't. I didn't think Kushida would use it. I had given her a taste of what I was capable of, and what I could do for her, as well as being her confidant. Aside from that night on the rooftop, I had never done anything against her. I was probably the person in the school she had the least reason for hating.

Perhaps one day we could delete each other's recordings, but for now with the threat of mutually assured destruction, and numerous reasons to not use them, I was willing to take the risk.

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Ichinose called me out a few days after that night with Kushida.

I found her waiting for me at the same place we had our discussion after Chihiro's failed confession. She was sitting alone, quietly, pondering over something serious based on the look on her face.

There was no trace of the cheerful kind Ichinose to be seen. Only a contemplative and melancholy one was left. I wondered what she wanted to talk to me about.

"Ichinose."

"Oh, hey Ayanokouji-kun."

The conversation stalled there, as I left it to her to continue it,

and Ichinose was in a very different mood than usual.

It was astounding how unlike her usual self she was. Perhaps this was the real Ichinose, behind her kindness, but I doubted it. More likely, the naïve girl had finally woken up. She had been exposed to the harsh reality of the world, probably for the first time in her life. Abstract stories, worries and warnings from a mother to a daughter were one thing, but to experience such an event, so close to home was incredibly different.

It also likely had an impact that Sakura's unfortunate situation was a result of the class conflict. Ichinose was the sort of person that I believed would compete and fight for Class A, but would do so in an honorable way, that wouldn't harm people beyond the rules and regulations set down. She wouldn't want to go so far as to genuinely harm someone, physically or emotionally, and seeing such actions done in the name of a competition must be shocking, to say the very least.

"I heard Sudou-kun's trial turned out well."

So, this was what she wanted to talk about. I wonder if she had deduced the situation. Ichinose was a perceptive person, so while there was no evidence, it was possible she could draw a conclusion.

"Yeah. Class C was exposed for their actions and suffered heavy losses."

"I heard. Komiya was expelled, and you got 50 of their class points. I suppose the truth won in the end."

There was a bitter tone in her voice, as if she didn't believe that the result had actually been the correct one.

I would have to play this very carefully.

"There was plenty of evidence in the end. Komiya made too many mistakes; it was easy to expose his actions. He's an idiot."

"Perhaps."

We sat in silence for a bit longer. The water in front of us rippled as ducks dove for food, hiding amongst the reeds.

Eventually Ichinose took a deep breath and collected herself, still facing the water.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. I want to believe in the good of everyone. I want to believe that everyone can work together and be kind. I also want to believe that the culprit in this case was caught and punished. Sakura deserves that. I want to believe that you had nothing to do with this. I want to believe you were simply opportunistic and took advantage of Komiya's mistakes to come out on top. Even so, the situation played out perfectly for you, in fact I doubt a better outcome would have been possible. Every instinct I have doubts you."

"Oh? And what do you think then."

"I don't think anything. There's no evidence to support my thoughts at all. Everything says Komiya was the guilty one."

She turned to me, a determined look on her face.

"But if I find out that you had anything to do with Sakura's suffering, I will expel you. No matter how much it pains me to target a friend, I will defeat you Ayanokouji-kun. Because if you did this, you are a horrible human being."

This was unexpected. I had no idea Ichinose could be so bold. I could see in her face how much in pained her to say this, to issue a warning to someone she trusted, someone she had allowed to help her with a secret confession.

I was possibly one of the few people in the school she could open up to fully, in her mind. She had her classmates, but a leader couldn't show weakness, couldn't have worries, so she could never fully be herself around them. To have to even consider going against me, one of her confidants, must be a painful decision for her.

And it was one I was incredibly proud of. Ichinose, you had potential I was looking forward to seeing.

"I'm not claiming to have done anything. The situation was terrible and I just took advantage of it. For a person to do what you suggest, they would have to be the most heartless emotionless monster, no longer human."

"I know. I want to believe in the good in you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Nagumo would be proud."

"Huh?"

It was a low blow, using what she had confessed to me in confidence against her, but it was necessary.

"You've finally started to become like him. He would find his target, and he would hunt them down, defeating them utterly, without remorse or chance for escape."

"You're wrong. He wouldn't do something like that."

Was she lying? Surely someone as connected as Ichinose had heard the rumours about him. Or perhaps she didn't want to believe her mentor was someone as cruel as that.

"You don't know him at all, then. Nagumo is ruthless, and if I am as evil as you suspect I am, then that's what you have to become to defeat someone like me."

I stood up to leave. This conversation was getting into dangerous territory.

"Ichinose, this school is a competition. There are those who will do whatever it takes to win. People like Komiya. So, pull your head out of the sand, or you might as well leave now. Because as you are right now, torn and conflicted, you will never be able to win."

I went to leave, but she called out to me once more.

"Ayanokouji-kun."

I turned to face her, seeing a determined Ichinose standing up, staring directly into my dull, empty eyes.

"I still consider you my friend. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, so please don't take that conversation the wrong way."

"I'm glad." It wouldn't be good to push her away from me completely. Ichinose was one of my only connections in Class B and keeping her around could prove useful.

"You said this is a class conflict, and you're right when you say that people will do whatever it takes to win. But I don't believe that. I still believe that everyone can get along."

"Ichinose, you see the world through kind eyes. I'm envious of that. It must be nice to have a positive view of the world. But not everyone will see it that way. And when the time comes, you will have to pick a side, and fight for it with all your might."

"You're wrong."

She was a stubborn one, stuck in her ideals.

"I suppose we will see in the end, which of us is right."

"I suppose we will."

The cheer returned to her face, a smile filling it again. Not a huge beaming one, which she gave to everyone around her, but a smaller, more genuine one. Not that her other smiles were lies or false, just that this one felt personal.

"Thank you for this, Ayanokouji-kun. You always help me when I need to talk."

"It's no problem."

I finally left the area, pondering over the conversation that had just occurred.

It really wasn't an issue to talk to Ichinose. So far, every conversation we had had been scintillating. It was never a boring time, conversing with the walking contradiction.

What interested me most was the threat she issued. She warned me that she would come for me if she ever found out I was behind Sakura's rape. I honestly hadn't expected such a confrontational attitude from her, although it makes sense thinking about it now.

Ichinose was a defender of justice and peace, kindness and happiness. While she seemed at first to be a pacifist, I suspect there wasn't much she wouldn't do to find justice. She was willing to help out with our case originally partially for that reason.

I just wondered if she would become like Nagumo like she wanted to, even if she didn't know what that meant. I truly hoped so. To see someone as pure as her fall into ruthfulness and vengeance would be amazing to watch.

Perhaps one day she would face off against me. I would enjoy it when that time came. To fight a fallen angel would be another wonder that came from this great school.

In the end, though, she did get one thing right.

I was a horrible human being.

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It was the last day of term when I met with Sakayanagi again.

Most people had gone home from school for the day, in order to pack for the two-week cruise that was leaving tomorrow, some had gone out to celebrate at karaoke or other various locations around the grounds the end of the first term.

What that meant was that the only two students left in the school building were Sakayanagi and me.

"It's been a while Ayanokouji."

"That it has."

Both of us were in an empty classroom, specifically Class 1-D. Just after the school bell rang, Sakaganagi had turned up, asking for a private conversation with me. How she got here I'm not sure, but Masumi was behind her leaning against a wall looking very puffed, as if just finishing some strenuous excursive. I could only imagine what tortures Sakayanagi had exposed the poor girl to.

Her request had generated some suspicious looks from classmates, but most were just confused. Since for most people the class competition was yet to begin, me meeting with another class's leader was nothing overly suspicious, just very strange. After receiving glares from her however, no one was brave enough to stick around.

"The school has given me an interesting piece of information. I felt like sharing it with you."

"Oh? How considerate. I assume it pertains to our upcoming holiday?"

That was the only event that seemed likely to have any relevance to both of us.

"Actually, only your holiday. I have been informed that due to my condition I cannot attend."

Interesting. I suspect that she has known this for a while now, as it would be incredibly inconsiderate to only inform her of her inability to participate the day before. More likely, Sakayanagi had been informed back when it was first announced and told to keep it quiet. More importantly, the implications of this...

"Fufufu I can see you've already figured it out."

"I'd be impressed if you could. I'm very bad at expressing myself."

"But knowing you, I'm sure you can tell what's going on."

Yes, I absolutely could. Based on the information we had been

given, the students would be going on a luxury cruise liner and living on a vacation island for two weeks. I had already found this suspicious, and so had other students such as Ichinose, who shared her own thoughts on it with me. We had already thought it would be likely that some large point swing would occur through some kind of special exam, but this was virtual confirmation.

For the school to exclude Sakayanagi, the leader of Class A from participating, it was obvious there would be some compulsory physical event that would occur. This was the only reason to keep her out, as her condition wouldn't be a problem if she just relaxed on the beach.

No, there was something much larger going on, one where they didn't have the time or inclination to accommodate her.

"Yes. It seems this vacation is going to be a lot more interesting than I thought."

"I would suspect so. But tell me Ayanokouji, you helped Sudou with his little problem. I was curious as to why?"

"Because it was fun. Do I need another reason?"

"No, I suppose not."

We both stood in silence facing off from each other. Out of everyone in the school, I suspect Sakayanagi was the most dangerous opponent there was. Despite her crippling disability, despite her short stature, her mind was beyond anyone else here, and her ruthful nature was unmatched, perhaps even by Ryuuen.

"Can I take it that you will be participating in the class competition?"

Her smile grew wide, anticipating or perhaps hopeful for my answer. To this terrifying girl there was only one person in the grade she had any interest facing off against. I suspect that Ryuuen could also provide a challenge, but it was not one she was interested in. No, she wanted to test herself against me, the ultimate challenge in her mind.

And I would be more than happy to oblige.

"Yes. It's the only interesting thing to do in this school, so I would be remiss to ignore it."

"Fufufu I'm glad. I hope you don't find your time boring here, Ayanokouji. I'm always going to make it interesting for you."

Apparently done with the conversation, she turned to leave the room, perhaps to plan what she would do alone for the next few weeks. Perhaps I could introduce her to Manabu. I'm sure she would find him stimulating enough to not grow bored. But for now...

"Do you mind if I play with your class a little?"

She turned back to face me, sparkles in her eyes.

"Oh, please do. Katsuragi will be taking charge once again, so

another humiliation would serve him well. Tear them to shreds for me, Ayanokouji. I can't wait to hear about it."

Oh, I will oblige you, Sakayanagi.

"Can I rely on your faction for help? It would be much more entertaining if their own downfall came from within."

"Fufufu you are fun. Yes, I will inform some of my pawns to listen to your orders Hashimoto and Masumi are yours to command for the break, if you need them. Enjoy my toys, Ayanokouji."

And with that she finally left the classroom, heading to the exit from the school building.

This holiday was shaping up to be a very interesting event. A class competition, almost certainly. A trip to an island, it would be nice to see a beach for once. And a relaxing cruise.

I was very eager to see what entertainment this school provided for me next.

Authors Notes

And that's the end of Arc 2. I hope you enjoyed a more interesting trial arc. I had a lot of fun writing it.

Thank you all so much for your comments, especially on the previous chapter. I was incredibly nervous posting it, so seeing so many people praising it, or at least reacting how i would expect was awesome. You guys are great!

No Ryuuen interaction yet, I'm saving that for the Island arc. That's next, and I've already started writing it.

Ichinose was very interesting in this chapter. I had a lot of trouble writing her part, since I knew the general idea of what I wanted her to say, but matching it with the character development I've given her so far plus keeping it somewhat canon was difficult. It took a lot of work but I'm pretty happy with the direction she's heading in.

Thank you so much for reading my story, and as always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 1 - Observations

A startling blue expanse spread out before me over the front of the boat. A glittering sea, filled with shining reflections of the sun shone up at me, as far as I could see in every direction.

I had never seen the ocean before today, at least not in person, and I could understand why so many people talked about it. Of all the poetry I had read in the white room, all the stories and adventures recorded into books, the ocean was a theme in many of them. It was an indescribable view, one that could only be experienced fully by seeing it yourself.

I had made my way out here with Kushida, after grabbing some early lunch, in order to get a chance to truly appreciate what I had spent so many years reading about.

We stood at the bow as the cruise liner moved through the water at frightening speeds, blasting through waves as it headed towards as small island I could see in the distance, growing closer and closer by the minute.

Every now and then a little bit of spray flew up in wet us slightly, but under the bright ocean sun, it was a rather pleasant experience.

"Woah, this is the best!"

Unfortunately, the beautiful view couldn't last forever, being ruined by the arrival of most of our classmates. In fact, it seemed most of the year had been steadily making their way to the front of the boat over the last hour. It only became obvious when the defects themselves made their way out, incapable of handling themselves properly in society.

Ike Kanji had arrived, his voice echoing across the deck of the luxury liner. Normally, someone would have grumbled or shouted "shut up" in response, but for today no one minded, instead enjoying this special moment of bliss.

"This view is incredible! I'm honestly super moved right now!"

Karuizawa and her group of girls had also made their way onto the deck.

It wasn't easy, but I had spent enough time with Kushida at this point to read her mood pretty well, even when she was acting her façade. The differences were very slight, but with every new arrival, and every disruptive outburst she was getting ever so slightly more

annoyed.

Unfortunately for Kushida, there was nothing to do about the situation, and she had to simply stand there and keep smiling, while interacting cheerfully with everyone who wanted to speak to her.

As the deck had gotten more crowded, I had subtly moved away from her, inch by inch, in order to not give away how close we had gotten. It was much better if people assumed we were simply acquaintances or not very close friends who sometimes hung out, rather than figuring out the true nature of our cooperation. Whatever that was anymore, because I had lost track at some point of what our relationship even was.

Of the people on the deck, Sudou, Ike and Yamauchi were by far the most disturbing ones. None of them seemed to have any filter on their volume, or their language, and I could see almost everyone around me was frustrated with them.

The trouble they were causing all came to a head, when a large group of students, from Class A if I remembered correctly, began to assemble on the deck. After a crowd had gathered, some particularly domineering boys showed up and began pushing the three idiots out of the way in order to get the best positions. While I had no qualms about their actions, since those three deserved it wholeheartedly, their reasoning was some of the most delusional and segregationist thinking I had ever come across.

"Hey, you're in the way. Move it, you defects."

One of the boys had shoved Ike, causing him to fall to the ground. The students around him laughed scornfully, apparently satisfied with their bullying.

"Hey, what the hell are you guys doing?!"

Sudou immediately responded in kind, trying to intimidate them right back. This was getting interesting. The holiday had just begun, and a brawl was already brewing between Classes D and A.

"You do understand how this school is structured, right? Class D doesn't get any human rights. Defects like you are just that—defective—so you should submit. We're all in Class A over here."

The students from Class D departed from the bow of the ship as if we'd been chased out. Sudou looked displeased but managed to restrain himself. A fistfight didn't break out, evidence that he was perhaps growing up. Or perhaps he simply understood Class D's weak position here. In any case, it was disappointing. Yahiko needed someone to teach him his place. Just because he was Katsuragi's biggest supported didn't mean that he was blessed with divine authority. Clinging onto someone's coattails was far more pathetic than accepting being lesser, in my mind.

Any Class A students who bought into the stigma that Class D was

that bad, didn't deserve to be in Class A. Sure, we had been selected purposefully for our problematic nature, but as of yet, there had been no evidence that Class D were the biggest problems in the grade. These students had drunk the proverbial Kool-Aid, and completely bought in to the idea of their own superiority.

In actuality, Class D had the two highest scorers on the previous exam. Class C had been the ones to cause the most trouble so far, and if Sakayanagi and Katsuragi were taken out of the equation, I suspect Class A would be the most incompetent out of all the classes. Yet they had the audacity to act as if they were superior, because they were in the same class as people better than themselves.

I would teach them a lesson soon enough.

Fed up with the lesser beings around them, and apparently done admiring the view already, most of Class A, and in fact most of the grade had already left. It seems their attention spans weren't much longer than a few minutes, before seeing the endless water became boring.

Surprisingly enough, of those that stayed the three idiots could be counted among them. They were huddled up together, not far from where Kushida and I were standing, whispering together and occasionally throwing a glance over to where we were. Whatever was about to happen was not going to end well.

"Hey, hey, Kushida-chan. Can I talk to you for a minute?" Ike finally made his way over to us, well, more to Kushida, and started what would be an extremely uncomfortable time for me.

"Hmm? What is it?"

Ike immediately approached Kushida, who had been looking at the sea. This was obviously a suspicious move.

"So, it's like this... It's been about four months since we met, right? So...I was wondering if it might be okay for me to call you by your first name now. I mean, it makes me feel like we're strangers when I call you by your last name."

"Come to think of it, I guess you and Yamauchi have been calling each other by your first names for a while now, huh?" Kushida said.

"So... I can't, huh? C-call you Kikyou-chan, I mean?"

In response to Ike's inquiry, Kushida simply smiled.

"Of course, it's okay for you to call me that. Should I call you Kanji-kun, then?"

"Whoooooaaaaa! Kikyou-chaaaaaaan!" Ike cried out and posed, as if he had just finished a marathon.

"How about you guys go get ready for the island. It's not far away, and you don't want to miss out on any time, do you?" Kushida, while on the outside was looking happy at getting closer

with a friend, probably wanted to vomit. The ugly pervert Ike was invading her personal space and calling her Kikyou, both things she had absolutely no desire to happen. It was the least I could do for her to hurry them away.

Surprisingly, I also was feeling a little protective of her. These idiots didn't deserve to be around my pet.

"Hey, Ayanokouji, when did you get here!" I've been here the whole time, moron. How can you be this blind? "You stay out of my way, got it! Kikyou-chan is mine!" Apparently, he had already forgotten that she was standing right beside him and could hear everything he said.

Behind him, Yamauchi seemed to be getting ready to back him up, but Sudou surprisingly was trying to stay out of it. It seemed their friendship wasn't quite as far as being complete idiots for each other, just less civilised than an ordinary person. I suppose Ike could use a little motivation to move.

"Ike, think about what girls wear to the beach? You wouldn't want to miss a second of that, would you?" The best way to a boy's heart, fill his mind with perverted fantasies and send him off.

"Ahhh, he's right Kanji, we don't have time for you to beat up Ayanokouji. We gotta get going!" And with that, Yamauchi grabbed Ike by the neck and dragged him away, Sudou following behind. Delusional, the lot of them.

After they had left, there weren't a lot of people left out on the deck on the boat. Seeing the opportunity, Kushida moved back closer to me, now that it wouldn't be so noticeable.

"Thanks for that. I felt like I was going to die, if it went on any longer."

"It's no problem. Ike needs to learn when to shut up."

We were both in agreement, it seemed, that the three boys were a problem.

"God, how does anyone put up with them. It's actually crazy that they think anyone wants to talk to them."

"Sometimes it's easier to just answer a question to get it over with, than to deal with a problem properly."

"I suppose that's true."

We returned to the comfortable silence that had existed before the entire grade had decided to come to the front of the boat. During the commotion, the boat had almost reached the island, even going as far as to circle around it a bit. It was a strange place for us to stay at, so I assumed we would be sleeping on the boat. There didn't seem to be any facilities built on it at all, from what I could tell, meaning the entire environment, while probably modified for student safety, was still as natural as a school could

possibly have.

"Hey, have you seen Horikita?"

"Why would I have seen her?"

It was a strange question to ask. Out of everyone in the class, I was probably the person she got along with the least, having not one conversation within the hearing of others that didn't devolve into insults and huffing.

Kushida took a quick look around, before deciding no one was close enough to hear us.

"You remember when I asked you for help expelling someone?"

"Do you want Horikita gone?

"Yeah."

To be honest I hadn't expected Horikita to be the target of Kushida's hatred. Based on her reasoning behind her actions, I had expected Ichinose as the most likely person she wanted gone, being her only rival for most loved girl in the grade. While her standing had dropped since the midterms, Ichinose could probably still rival Kushida's affection from everyone, and she did it without even trying. I had been sure that she would want Ichinose gone.

So why Horikita?

"Hmm. I can't say I wouldn't like to expel her, but it all depends on the timing."

"What does that matter? You framed Komiya easily enough."

"Despite her annoying tendencies, Horikita is still an important class member. She's smarter than almost everyone, and she's pretty fit too. Getting rid of her would be a problem."

"So... you won't help me?"

"I didn't say that. Can you tell me why her in particular?"

If I was going to target a classmate, I needed a good reason.

"She and I went to the same middle school. She knows about my true nature."

That was a very good reason. While Horikita didn't seem like the person to stick her nose into other people's business, if she went to the same middle school as Kushida, it would have been virtually impossible to not find out about the incident with her blog.

She also didn't seem like the sort of person to spread that story around, not caring about other people enough to bother, just her existence was a threat to Kushida, and her value. It seems I would have to deal with her at some point.

"Very well. She's obviously a problem, so I'll help you expel her."

"Really?!"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

Damn. This was a predicament. Ignoring her personality, Horikita was one of the best students in the class. In fact, I would place her

in third, behind Kouenji. She was smart and fit, and I suspected pretty reliable if she had a task, being the studious honour student type. Expelling her would definitely be a blow to the class.

"I won't do it right away, though."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Where's the fun in that. I'm sure there will be plenty of chances to toy with her soon, so I may as well break her first."

"God, you're crazy." The grin on Kushida's face told me she was as well.

"Don't pretend you're not looking forward to it."

"Guilty!"

Kushida gave a laugh at that, obviously excited for what was going to happen to Horikita, her main threat at school besides me. Although that does beg the question.

Does she still consider me a threat?

The answer: assume yes, no matter how much evidence says no.

"Attention, students. Please assemble on the deck. You will be able to see the island soon. This is a good time to take in some rather significant scenery."

This rather strange announcement issued from the ship's PA. Most of the still people didn't seem to take notice of it. I assumed, that while it was a suggestion from the school to take a look, most people would ignore it, rationalising that they had already been on the deck and seen the scenery already.

Of everyone on the deck at the moment, only Katsuragi had a noticeable reaction to the announcement. He was likely also suspicious of this trip, due to Sakayanagi's absence, and was already on guard for any important incidents. I could see his posture straighten, as he began to observe the island much more closely, taking in key features instead of just gazing at a lump of green surrounded by blue.

It seemed he was more perceptive than I thought. I hadn't expected him to pick up on the hint, but he obviously had, at least enough to find it suspicious. I could see his eyes darting around the island with a keen intelligence behind them, categorising every single detail in sight.

It was easy to forget with a genius like Sakayanagi around, that Katsuragi was also a very intelligent individual himself. Perhaps he would be more interesting to battle during this holiday, a battle I suspected would begin very soon on this island.

But right now, this would be a good opportunity to see how Kushida thinks.

"What did you think of that announcement?"

"What about it?"

Like most of the students, Kushida had only taken the superficial message from it, and not taken a second to think deeper. It was understandable, as there weren't many people constantly suspicious and on guard like I was. I did wonder where she would get with some prodding.

"Take a moment and look around. Try and notice anything that seems strange or unusual."

"Can't you just explain, like always Mr Genius?"

"Humour me."

I wanted to see what Kushida was capable of. I had given her an initial prod, by suggesting indirectly there was something off about the announcement, but nothing else. I wasn't sure just how perceptive she wasn't, so I was curious if she could piece anything together.

"Eugh, I can't think properly when I'm constantly getting blasted with ocean spray. My clothes are going to get ruined, this is even worse than... wait."

If concern about the state of her clothes made her mind turn, I had no complaints about her priorities.

"The boat's moving much faster than it was earlier, isn't it? Is that what you meant?"

"It's one thing, but on its own it means nothing. Is there anything else strange about the boat?"

She took a moment, leaning against the rail, flinching when some sea spray got in her eyes.

"Have we gone around the island?"

Very good Kushida.

"Twice actually. Since just before the announcement, the boat sped up and began to circle the island."

"But what's the point?"

"Think about the announcement again."

Her brow furrowed as she focused entirely on trying to combine the two ideas. It wasn't a simple jump in logic, but I was confident that she would be able to make it correctly.

"Is the school trying to make us notice something? Something about the island?"

"Bingo."

This had been a good test of her observation and reasoning skills. With just a few simple clues, Kushida had been able to put together a reason for seemingly pointless and unrelated occurrences in a way that almost no one else had. I suspect that a lifetime of listening to fragments of secrets and piecing them together in a way she could fully understand them had been good training for this skill.

"I still feel like I'm missing something. They want us to look at the island. So what? We're going to have a vacation there soon anyway."

"What if I told you that Sakayanagi wasn't allowed to come on this trip. Not chose not to, but not allowed by the school because of her disability."

"Wait, but why would they... could the school be planning something?"

"That's what I think. Take note of the significant scenery, Kushida, it's likely to play an important role in the next few days."

I was impressed. She had figured everything out, reasonably quickly as well. Just another benefit of keeping someone as talented as her around.

"You figured all this out instantly?"

"Pretty much. It's just something I'm good at. I have to say though, good job piecing it together."

"Don't forget that I'm smart, just because I'm so cute."

"I'd go so far as to say you're definitely both."

I tried to tease her a little. To her credit, my compliment didn't even phase her. Most girls would blush and stutter something unintelligible, but Kushida brushed it off without faltering.

"Don't flirt, you lack the emotional range for it to be anything but uncomfortable."

"Is it flirting if I'm stating facts?"

"Flirting and flattery are the same fine line. Take a few steps back, robot man."

The boat continued on its circular path for a while longer. We still had over half an hour until the time we were told to disembark, so I felt comfortable remaining here and looking out over the ocean for a little longer. It seemed Kushida did too.

After a few minutes she broke the silence between us.

"Don't you think you should be calling me Kikyou by now?"

"Eh?"

I hadn't even considered something like that. I still didn't understand what was so important about calling a girl by their first name, in a way that drove Ike to jump for joy when he had permission or bring them to their knees in fear of asking. I also didn't understand the reactions girls gave to hearing their first names said. The extreme level of personal relation that embodied a first name to a high school student was beyond my comprehension.

"We're friends, right? Even if you're just using me, I spend half my nights in your room." Luckily no one had overheard that incredibly suggesting sentence Kushida just uttered. It made sense to us, but anyone else would unquestionably get the wrong idea. "It only

makes sense to call each other by first names. Besides, if you're gonna be around me more often it makes sense for our cover."

"How so?"

"Even Ike calls me Kikyou-chan now, even if I despise it. I hang out with you a lot more than him, and it would be strange for us to not do it."

"I see." I really didn't, but I suppose it couldn't hurt.

"We should probably get ready to go to the island, Kikyou."

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it? Come on, Kiyotaka, time to find out what's so special about this island!"

She really was a troublesome woman.

Authors Notes:

Here we go, island exam time. I'm hype, this is one of the events I've had planned in my head for ages now, so getting to write it out is a lot of fun.

No SS for the last arc. I did try, I really wanted to do a Ryuuen one, but for the life of me i couldn't get his character right. I genuinely can't write him, it's really frustrating. Oh well, perhaps one at the end of this arc. We shall see.

Big question, how do you all feel about Kikyou, first name basis. It feels weird to write honestly, but it makes sense for the characters at this point so I've gone with it.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 2 - Island Time

I separated from Kikyou not much later and made my way back to my room to pack for the island trip. The school had informed us to pack our phones and luggage, leaving everything else behind. This was just another piece of suspicious evidence on the mountain the school had provided. Why would we need to bring our luggage, and why would we need to leave anything personal behind? There was no logic to bringing our luggage, if we were staying on the boat at night, and there was no need to not bring our personal items if we were staying on an island resort, of which there obviously wasn't one.

After changing into my jersey, I made my way back to the deck to disembark, standing to the side watching all the other students mingling around like sheep.

I wasn't particularly paying attention to them, however, as there were five students in particular I was focusing on, and trying to determine just what they were thinking or had reasoned out.

Ryuuen was standing alone for once, all his cronies pushing towards the front in order to try and get off first, sans Albert, who was standing beside a silver-haired girl, Shiina Hiyori. I wondered at the nature of that friendship, as they didn't seem remotely similar, but for now it wasn't important.

Ryuuen had his usual vicious grin plastered across his face, probably amused at the chaos caused by 160 students all pushing towards the front, but his eyes were narrowed, darting across both the island, and the teachers. Clearly, he was trying to figure something out, finding the hints at least suspicious, but whether he had pieced any more together I couldn't tell.

Katsuragi, much like Ryuuen, had taken a place towards the back of the crowd. Unlike Ryuuen, however, he had a calm confident look on his face. I wasn't much surprised at this, given that he had extra information over everyone else, and I had seen him take note of the announcement earlier. Katsurai was expecting the unexpected, and whatever happened, he seemed to feel ready.

Kanzaki too stood to the back, although he had a few friends around him. They were all discussing exciting ideas from what I could hear, given how close to them I was, but the leader was silent, hand on his chin and head tilted down, the model picture of

contemplation. I was pleased to see he found the entire situation too good to be true. I had high hopes for Kanzaki and would have been disappointed if he had simply accepted the holiday at face value.

Ichinose was the biggest disappointment, outwardly. In actuality, I was impressed by her behaviour. I knew she had been suspicious of this trip for the last month or so, but she showed no sign of it now. Whether it was an act to rise in her classes respect, or she genuinely was this way I wasn't sure, but she was bouncing around between every student, class member or no, with a positive and energetic attitude, getting everyone she talked to excited for the island. An interesting strategy of hers, I wonder if it could make up for the loss of face she suffered with the exams.

And lastly, Horikita was...

Great. Horikita was sick. I could see her leaning on a railing, face pale and legs wobbling slightly. She had clearly just woken up, probably trying to rest and combat her illness, but this was no good. How was I supposed to live up to my promise if she broke at a slight breeze? She really looked unhealthy.

Fabulous.

"We will disembark now, beginning with the students from Class A. Cell phones are prohibited on the island. Please hand your phone to your homeroom teacher as you leave."

Following the loudspeaker's command, the students went down the stairs in an orderly fashion.

"Come on. Hurry up! Even though we're wearing thin clothes, we're all sweating!"

There was no place to hide from the sun on the ship's deck. No surprise that people were complaining. The Class D students waited on standby in the heat.

More surprising was having to hand our phones over. What could we possibly be doing on an island that required us to not have phones? Plenty of students would want to use them for pictures at least. The only reasoning I could come up with was that they didn't want us to transfer points, but even that seemed unreasonable, as it was a perfectly valid method of winning a competition; bribery is an effective tool, so it wouldn't make sense for a school that expected fights to stop that from happening.

Once everyone had finally made their way off the boat, each class was separated, and Chabashira took our roll.

"I will now start roll call for Class D. When you hear your name, please respond loud and clear."

Our homeroom teacher started taking attendance, clipboard in hand, while simultaneously instructing us to form a line.

Chabashira wore the same kind of jersey as her students. This atmosphere was more akin to training camp than summer vacation. Still, not many of the students seemed tense at all.

"Oh, come on! I want my free time already! The sea is right in front of me!" Ike muttered, standing directly behind me."

Despite every single unusual occurrence, it seemed most students in my class, if not the grade still expected this to be a vacation. Perhaps they were just naïve, yet to have their eyes opened to the cruelty of this school, but I thought it was more likely they were dumb.

Seeing this level of incompetence every single day had made me wonder why the White Room was so harsh. I, and everyone else in my generation, even the failures, were worlds beyond these students. This school was supposed to take the elite students of the population, so if these were the best, then the nation was in a sorry state.

"Most of the students wanted to run off onto the sandy beach. Soon enough, a tall teacher stepped onto a prepared white platform. It was Mashima, Class A's homeroom teacher. He normally taught English, and was well-known for having a stubborn disposition.

At first glance, he could easily be mistaken for one of those bodybuilder types. He was built like a professional wrestler, but was actually quite intelligent. He'd even taught special courses in the past.

"First, I would like to say that I'm happy you've arrived safely. However, it's unfortunate that one of you was unable to participate due to illness."

"Oh wow, someone couldn't come on the trip because he was sick? Poor guy," said Ike quietly, so the teachers wouldn't hear."

Ike, you and everyone else should be counting your lucky stars that Sakayanagi was unable to attend. If she had come along, whatever the teachers have prepared would already be over.

While Mashima surveyed the students in silence, I could see that adults in uniform had started setting up some kind of special tent nearby. I also saw a computer and other equipment on a long table. This increasingly business-like setup didn't match the natural splendor around us at all, and many of the students looked perplexed.

Mashima uttered a few cruel words, as if waiting for the atmosphere to change. "Well then. We shall commence the current academic year's first special test."

There it is. Finally, something fun.

"Huh?" "Special test?" "What do you mean?"

"The test commences now and lasts for one week, concluding on

August 7th at the year's end. This test will determine if you can live on a deserted island together as a group. In addition, I should warn you that this special test is both practical and realistic, designed based on real-world corporate training."

"Living on a deserted island. Does that mean we're not staying on the boat, but the island?"

Some students from Class B and C voiced their obvious concerns.

"You are correct. During the test, you will not be allowed to board the ship without a suitably justifiable reason. It will be necessary for you to fend for yourselves on this island while you are here, from creating a place to sleep to preparing food to eat. Once the test starts, each class will receive two tents, and two flashlights. You will be provided with one box of matches. There is no limit to the amount of sunscreen you can have. Each student will be provided with one toothbrush. As a special case, girls will be allowed to have as many feminine sanitary products as they'd like, without any restrictions. Please ask your respective homeroom teachers for those. That is all."

With that, the teachers began distributing the items. So, this was the test. No wonder Sakayanagi hadn't been allowed to come along. Someone with her condition would be at a high risk out here, especially since it seemed like the next week was completely up to the autonomy of the students. I doubted the teachers would interfere except in the case of serious danger, so they wouldn't want Mashima to have to hover around Sakayanagi the entire time.

While I was thinking, the entirety of Class D had collapsed into chaos once again. They really were the most defective people in the grade and putting them all together just made their faults amplified.

It was impressive how little rationality they possessed. It seemed their entire lives were governed by their Id, with little self-control or logical reasoning. This just made my job of winning all the more challenging, and in the end, rewarding.

Mashima gave no sign that this was some kind of joke. If anything, he appeared surprised by what Ike had said.

"You may say this is unbelievable, but that's because you've lived a short, superficial life. There is an actual, prominent company that holds training sessions on uninhabited islands."

"Huh? B-but this...this isn't special at all. Is it? Isn't it too much to ask for us to start living on a deserted island with no warning? No way! This is unreal!"

"Keeping on like that would be shameful, Ike, so stop talking. What Mashima just said is only part of it. There are many companies in the world with many different training activities. There are workplaces where there aren't any chairs in the office,

and companies that decide salaries with dice rolls. The world is wider and deeper than you even know."

Chabashira, as if unable to overlook Ike running his mouth, chided him. She continued, "In other words, you are ill-equipped to distinguish between what is reality and what isn't."

Even so, I felt this was an extreme reason for the exam. It was true that some corporations had island getaways, but they didn't gamble their jobs on them, nor were they moronic teenagers. More likely, the reasoning for the exam was garbage, and it was just an effective method of seeing how we react to stressful situations.

Many of the students appeared unconvinced and wore dissatisfied looks.

"But, teacher, isn't this supposed to be our summer vacation? We were brought here under the pretext of going on a relaxing trip. Don't you think that bringing us here and then springing this corporate training on us could be considered unfair?"

Some of the students in our class began to protest along these lines.

"I see. I suppose that you're not wrong about that. I can understand why you would be discontented."

Mashima's response showed that he recognized the soundness of such an argument, unlike Ike's complaints. There were students who were dissatisfied with the current situation, and those who were dissatisfied with the process as a whole.

"However, please do not worry. It would make sense for you to have complaints if you were being forced into a harsh situation. However, even though we're calling it a special test, there's no need to think about it in such unhappy terms. In the coming week, you can go swimming, or hold a barbecue. It wouldn't be a bad time for you to occasionally have a campfire and chat with friends, either. The theme of this special exam is 'freedom', after all."

This was certainly a strange theme. I wondered how it would apply to the exam.

"Huh? Huh? The theme is freedom? We can have a barbecue? Hmm? And this is still called a test? I'm so confused..."

Even though this was a test, we were free to play. The contradiction confused the students, and our doubts only increased.

"As a major part of this special test, we've decided to distribute 300 points to each class. By using your points well, you might be able to enjoy this week's special test just as you would a normal trip. We've also prepared a manual just for that purpose."

Mashima received a booklet that looked to be a few dozen pages thick from another teacher.

"This manual lists all of the ways you can obtain points. It also

explains where to get drinking water and food, as well as essential necessities. If you wanted to have a barbecue, it explains how to prepare the equipment and ingredients. We also have numerous tools for you to be able to enjoy playing in the ocean to the fullest."

Gradually, the students' grim expressions grew calmer.

"So, we can do whatever we want with the 300 points?"

It can't be that simple. But I could tell from the reactions of everyone around me that they were completely caught on the idea of living a fun party life on the beach.

"That's right. It's possible to arrange for anything using your points. Of course, it's necessary for you to use them in a systematic way, but with a solid plan, you can spend your week without any difficulties."

So, what was the catch?

"When this special test period is over, each class' remaining points will be added to their total class points. Your point totals will reflect this change once summer vacation is over."

Oh.

This was going to be extremely difficult. There was no way to win this exam with the classmates I had if that was the entire exam.

An even bigger problem was the already massive gap in class points. Currently we were 517 points behind Class C, meaning that 300 class points would be a huge amount for us to receive. The only problem was that other classes could also get this many, and if there was one class that would not be able to restrain themselves from using points, it was mine.

Great.

"So if we can endure this for one week, then starting next month we could see a huge increase in our allowance?!" Ike asked.

Imagine that. Ike is the one with his priorities in order. But I suspected he would try and force that attitude on our class way too hard.

"Each class will receive one copy of the manual. If the manual is lost, you may have another copy. However, it will consume points, so please be very careful. Also, the student who was marked absent from this trip was from Class A. According to the rules of this special test, should any student have to leave due to illness, there will be a thirty-point penalty to the class as a whole. Therefore, Class A will be starting with 270 points."

Now there was a strategy. I could go around on the first night and damage the other 119 students in the grade badly enough that they had to retire. It was possible, I was certainly capable of it. The only problem was doing it without arousing any suspicion. We would win the exam for sure, but it really was a foolish idea.

Now that Mashima had finished giving out the information on the exam, the classes separated once again, and we were subjected to the icy-cold attitude of Chabashira once more.

"Thirty thousand points next month, thirty thousand points next month, thirty thousand points next month. Let's do it!"

Ike and the others struck victorious poses. The girls happily discussed what things they would buy. There seemed to be a clear divide in the class, with every single boy planning on going without food apparently for the next seven days so that we received all 300 points, while the girls seemed intent on using them all up.

"I will now hand out wristwatches to every one of you. You are not to take them off until the end of the test. If you remove your wristwatch without permission, you will be punished. This watch doesn't just tell time. Its sensors also check your body temperature, your pulse, and even your movements. It's equipped with a GPS. Also, in the off chance something bad does happen, this watch comes equipped with the means to notify the school. If you find yourself in an emergency situation, please do not hesitate to push that button."

Was the school expecting things to go wrong? It was fair to assume this was a method of monitoring all the students in the exam, but it seemed far to excessive for just potential accidents.

"When you say an emergency, do you mean, like, if a bear shows up?"

I wonder if anyone would believe a

"Even if that was a joke, the test has already begun. I cannot answer any questions that might possibly influence your results."

"Uh...that's a kinda freaky answer."

"I don't think there are any wild animals here. If one of the students were injured, that would be a big problem. They probably gave us these watches solely to manage our well-being. Don't you agree? We're on an uninhabited island, after all, and the school has to ensure our safety," Matsushita said.

"Before you all continue your conversations, I'd like you to read the last page of the manual where the penalties are listed. Things won't be as easy as you think it will be. This is very important information that encapsulates the difficulties of this special test. It will determine whether you live or die"

"On the last page, a line read, "These penalties will be applied to anyone who falls under the following conditions."

"Anyone deemed unable to continue the test due to significant deterioration in health or serious injury will be penalized by thirty points. That student will then retire."

"In the event a student has polluted the environment, he or she

will be penalized twenty points."

"In the event students are absent during the 8 AM or 8 PM roll call, five points will be taken for each student absent."

However, the most serious punishment was detailed in the fourth entry on the list. "In the event a student is found guilty of an act of violence toward another class, robbing another class, or causing damage to another class' property, etc., the offending student's class will immediately be disqualified, and the individual will forfeit all of his or her private points."

It looked like Class A was subject to these same penalties. The fourth rule was totally reasonable, written to prevent students from engaging in harmful behaviour, while the other three rules were clearly there so individual students wouldn't behave carelessly. Because we had roll call in the morning and at night, it was impossible to sleep your time away at camp. It was also meant to suppress rather barbaric behaviour, like a student littering everywhere."

It also seemed my assassination plan was not possible.

"Finally, let me tell you all about the additional rules."

"A-additional rules? There's more?"

"Soon you will be permitted to roam about freely, but there are several designated 'spots' on the island. In these spots, there is what's referred to as right of exclusive possession, and only the class that occupies that spot may exercise those rights. The class that obtains those rights is entirely free to determine how they wish to exercise them. However, rights of exclusive possession are only valid for a period of eight hours after being invoked, after which they are automatically revoked. That means that another class can acquire those rights at that time. Also, you gain one bonus point if you occupy a spot once. However, that point is provisional, and cannot be used during the testing period. Therefore, bonus points are calculated and added to your total after the test has ended. Because the school is constantly monitoring you, there is no room for fraud. Please be aware of that fact."

That was good news. Now that there were more ways to earn points, I had an opportunity to manipulate the exam. But it still felt like there was something missing. This wasn't a competition between classes yet, rather an individual group survival. I felt there was one more rule to add on.

The last rule changed everything.

Each class had to have a leader selected. Only the leader can use the key card to claim spots, but that wasn't the point of them. On the last day, each class could name the leader of the other classes, gaining 50 points if it was right and losing 50 points if it was

wrong. Additionally, if your leader was guessed, your class lost another 50 points.

It was this rule that completely changed the exam and gave me an opportunity.

Most students would focus on not spending points. In actuality that was a pipe dream, and it was inevitable that most classes would spend about 150 points to live in a relaxed style for the next week, 100 if they were careful. The real chance for victory came from the leaders.

Ryuuen would realise this. He would base his strategy around the leaders, probably not caring what happened to the 300 points. They were negligible against finding the leaders of other classes.

Katsuragi too, would realise the importance of guessing the leaders, but due to his nature, he would most likely aim for a defensive strategy, neither guessing nor exposing their leader in any way.

Class B was the most interesting one. Ichinose, and most of the class members would probably go for a pacificists strategy, playing it safe like Katsuragi. Kanzaki was the outlier. He was more ambitious, more aggressive, and in turn would be easiest to manipulate.

The class had collapsed into argument at this point. Not only had they been shown the unsanitary and disgusting toilet to use, which the girls understandably refused to use, they also couldn't decide on a leader to pick.

Kikyou had appeared next to me, eyeing the mess of voices with concern.

"They're hopeless. There's no way we can win this."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"So, you have a plan, then?"

"Nope, obviously not."

"You need to start making sense soon, or I'm gonna get mad."

No one had noticed our conversation to the side, caught up with their aggressive debate. Chabashira was standing to the side, looking disappointed as ever in our class, but eventually I caught her eye, and signalled to wait.

"The 300 points don't really matter. Your job is to just make sure we don't spend too much."

"So, you do have a plan."

"The entire exam revolves around the leaders, so there's no point in making plans. I'm just going to react to whatever the other classes do."

"Confident as usual, I see."

"Just do your part, and everything should be fine. And don't

worry, you'll still get to toy with Horikita" She smiled cutely at the reminder of my agreement.

With that, Kikyou had her orders. I trusted her to be able to improvise enough to keep the class from spending all our points at once. If worst came to worst, I would simply spend the last points and make them all retire. It would be hard to win only with leader guessing, so keeping some would be helpful, but really it wasn't necessary.

There were far too many variables in this exam for me to make a plan. Classes with a strong leader, which happened to be every other class, was capable of doing so, but Class D was too divided to be able to rely on people following orders. If I made a plan relying on having 200 points left on the end, someone would inevitably mess it up. That was why I was just going to exploit my opponents' mistakes. If I can't raise my class up, I'll just bring everyone else down.

Now, it was time for my first move.

"Chabashira, make Horikita the leader!"

I raised my voice loud enough that everyone in the class heard, but it didn't carry beyond us. As I said that, everyone went silent, turning to face me, before starting to shout exclamations. Chabashira simply smiled, and once I nodded again, she pulled out a key card and labelled it with the name 'Horikita Suzune'.

"What are you talking about Ayanokouji! You don't get to decide this!"

"Sensei, stop, Horikita isn't our leader, Hirata is!"

"No, Kushida-chan should be, she's our leader!"

Their outburst continued for a moment, before Chabashira interrupted them. It was very handy to have her on my side. Since she knew I was working for the class, despite my dismissive and uninterested behaviour so far, she was smart enough to follow my orders.

"It's too late. I've made the key card already. Here, Horikita. You're Class D's leader from now on."

Everyone seemed to be in shock for a moment, that their entire conversation (read: argument) for the last few minutes had been for nothing. Luckily, I had a secret weapon.

"Hahaha, all of you defects are so pathetic. Demon-boy picked the perfect leader for you, and you argue back. How sad."

"Shut up, Kouenji, it's not like you're helping!"

While some people stopped and thought about what he thought, the majority of the class levelled insults something similar to that towards the beast of a man. Whether he had figured out the extent of my plan, or simply realised the benefits of Horikita, I couldn't

tell. He wasn't wrong though, Horikita was objectively the best choice. She was smart and reliable yet didn't stand out enough for people to suspect her. Really, most of my classmates had blinded themselves to her value by her attitude, it was impressive.

"Now that that's sorted, how about we go on a trip, Kouenji?"

"An excellent idea, demon-boy, but where would you suggest?"

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

"You can't leave we have an exam to win!"

A few people tried to complain, but we simply ignored them and talked on.

"I was thinking of meeting Katsuragi. He seems to have a good idea of what's going on."

"Ah, so you want to play with Baldy-kun for a while? I suppose a perfect existence such as myself would come along for that."

Ignoring the cries and insults levied at us, Kouenji and I moved towards the lush jungle of the island. It seemed he had picked up on my hint that Katsuragi had paid attention to 'significant scenery' and there was one obvious spot on the island that he would head to. It was a gamble, but if we got there before him, and he did in fact go to the cave, Katsuragi was finished.

This exam, while simple, would hopefully prove interesting.

Authors Notes:

This chapter was rather boring to write, and half of it is direct rip from the light novel. Some of it has been changed, such as different character speaking as an influence of my changes in the previous chapters, and Kouenji and Ayanokouji speaking at all here is new. I figured not many people have actually read the light novels recently, and this is a good recap of the rules, because honestly they're kinda scuffed to understand. I had to spend a hot minute on the wiki page just to make sure I'd done the calculations for points correctly because it's very vague wording, probably intentionally.

I always have something else I want to mention here, but when it comes time to post a chapter i always forget it. Next time I remember I'll write it down.

This chapter is late due to me eating the forbidden ham for lunch. It was an amazing sandwich but not worth being subjugated to toilet prison.

Anyways, I hope you enjoyed

Arc 3 Chapter 3 - Exploring

Moving at a fast pace, Kouenji and I quickly made it out of earshot of our classmates' insults. We moved quickly through the lush jungle of the island, neither of us really pushing ourselves, but also bordering on the edge of effort, as if daring the other to lose.

While I didn't much care for competing with others, Kouenji was always interesting. At least he gave me the chance to keep my physical skills up to scratch, because I was certain they would degrade over time if I didn't have a reason to keep training them.

"I assume we will be taking a look at the cave?"

I hadn't told Kouenji where we were going yet, but he had been able to make the same deduction I had.

"Yep. Katsuragi had a noticeable reaction to the hints the school gave us. I thought it would be likely he would go to the cave."

"Hahaha Baldy-kun must think no one else would notice the hint then. He must have forgotten about my amazing self."

Of course, it was only a gamble. There was no evidence that Katsuragi would go to the cave, or that he had even noticed. But if he had, I suspected he was smart enough to recognise it as the best location to claim.

"Even if he doesn't show up someone will. It's the best spot, so we can always just wait and see."

"If you're expecting me to simply sit and wait for a possibility of entertainment, you seem to have no idea of who I am, Ayanokouji-boy."

That was true. Kouenji only did things that interested him, so if he felt the situation grew tedious he would leave without a second thought.

"Of course, I know. But you're going to retire from the exam anyway, right?"

We both stopped jogging at the top of a small mound, Kouenji turning to face me with a deadly grin on his face.

"Are you intending to win?"

"Unlike you, I find this competition interesting enough for me to care."

That was the crux of the matter. I was invested in winning the exam. Kouenji was not. The only reason he had stuck around this long was probably because he had no valid reason to drop out yet.

But running around in the jungle was an easy way to acquire an injury enough to put him out of the special exam.

"Then there should be no problem with my departure. Do you plan to stop me?"

"Not at all. I've already been planning on the basis that you leave. It's just a shame to lose your talents."

"It would be a shame to waste my talents on something as mediocre as surviving on an island."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Besides, those ugly defects don't deserve having me around while they camp. It would degrade my very soul to have to sleep in a tent with such lesser people."

Now he was just being his narcissistic self.

"You don't think there is value in leading them? With their incompetence, it wouldn't take much to turn most of the class into your loyal slaves."

"What use is a slave if they're incompetent. The effort I would expend on taking control of the class would be wasted on such disgusting creatures. Besides, you are not controlling the class either. It's much more fun to watch them run around like animals with no idea what's going on."

We really did have similar ideas on fun. A class divided was a lot more enjoyable to deal with than a class united. And their inability to understand how they ever did well would be a powerful smoke screen to all but a few in the grade. If our own class didn't know what was going on how was anyone else supposed to.

"Why are we here anyway. If we wanted to reach the cave, we should have veered slightly further to the east." Kouenji had been the one leading us on this side path, and I wasn't sure why.

"True, but I felt that I might as well help in some way. Did you not pay attention to the island properly? I expected more, Ayanokouji-boy."

I took a moment to look around the area we were at. Kouenji had led me here for a reason, and he claimed it was to be helpful, so he was obviously highlighting something important.

It took a moment, but I soon noticed a flash of yellow throw the trees, just below the top of them.

"The corn field."

"Hahaha so you did see it after all."

"I'm not as tall as you. You can see over these trees much easier than I can."

It was true. Kouenji was taller than me, a fact that had to be acknowledged. It did give him an advantage over me in some situations, like now.

"Excuses are the refuge of the pitiful, especially when it's something as petty as height."

"I should thank you for leading me here. I had noticed it, but I wasn't sure how to get here."

I had spent most of my time on the boat dealing with Kikyou and noticing main features of the island. Smaller details like the paths between spots was something I hadn't taken careful note of. I had a rough idea of how to traverse the island, but other than that I hadn't a clue.

"Distracted by your woman, I see. Perhaps there still is hope for you after all..."

Kouenji teasing? What was this island doing to his mind? It was imperative he retired as soon as possible.

"We don't have time for such nonsense, if we want to get to the cave before anyone."

I mentally marked down how to get to the corn in my mind. It would be worth coming back for after our little trip, so I had something to show for abandoning the class. I didn't particularly care what they thought, but if I selected a leader, ran off and returned with nothing their complaints would be ceaseless. Really, I just wanted to nap for the first few days, before anyone made their move.

We began to move again, heading towards the cave. Really the stop had only take a few minutes, but Katsuragi, or whoever got to the cave first would be a smart leader. If they were capable of getting their leader to the cave straight away, then they would also be capable of getting their class organised very quickly.

We were almost there, having taken slightly longer due to Kouenji's inability to walk past a vine without swinging on it, when he broached a conversation again.

"I must say I was impressed with how you solved Class C's pitiful attempt to attack us."

I had not expected this of all things to come up in conversation.

"It wasn't that impressive. You could have exposed Komiya just as easily as I did."

"Don't take me for a fool, Ayanokouji-boy. I may seem disconnected from the rest of the grade, but I notice enough, and if there is one thing I am confident in it's my perceptiveness."

This was a serious conversation. For Kouenji to cease his 'perfect human' act and admit he had one characteristic that was better than others was a sign of how serious he was here.

"What are you trying to say, Kouenji?"

I wasn't going to admit to anything.

"You played a dangerous game. It was entertaining, but you

walked a fine line with the risk you took."

"I can't ever imagine losing."

"No, I would expect not, at least not to the rabble of our grade." Is he implying that he can beat me? "But it would be a shame to see you gone."

"I never would have thought you cared. How sweet"

"Of course, I care. Who is supposed to entertain a perfect existence if you are gone?"

"So, you'd be bored? How tragic." I suspected that wasn't everything.

"I'd also have to find some other means to reach Class A. I'm perfectly comfortable leaving everything to you, so your departure would only be an annoyance."

Another surprise. I didn't realise Kouenji had any aspirations for Class A. Obviously with me in his class, it was entirely possible he had assumed our rise would be inevitable, but even so there hadn't even been so much as a hint that he wanted to rise up the class ranks.

And I couldn't figure out the reason why.

"What could possibly motivate you to reach Class A? You have a place with the Kouenji conglomerate already, so there is not benefit."

"This is one of the glaring flaws of the White Room; you have no sense of how the world works, demon-boy"

He wasn't wrong about that. Despite the extensive training and education I had been through, I had a fatal lack of understanding when it came to human interaction, and societal norms or expectations often escaped my grasp.

"It's expected of me by my parents to be the best, the perfect human. Such a being couldn't possibly finish school in a class lower than A."

Kouenji had lost his usual lack of interest in everything, his normal smile gone from his face. In fact, he even looked slightly vulnerable. This was the root of who he was. Constant pressure from his parents, who were very important people in society, to be the best had led to this attitude, his superiority complex and narcissism. It was partially an act, it seemed, or it had become his personality as a response to unending pressure.

No matter how much he played down his care for anything and pretended to not be interested due to his superiority over everyone, here he was as his true self, or at least his concern.

I was surprised to see him being this honest, and I didn't expect him to ever do so again. This was his one flaw, his parent's pressure on him to succeed. And for that reason he needed to reach Class A.

For the first person I had a proper conversation in this school with, I suppose I could help him out.

"I have every intention of reaching Class A. If that means dragging an uncooperative person like you as well, then so be it."

Kouenji regained his trademark smirk, his air of superiority returning to him like nothing had happened.

"Hurry up then, Ayanokouji-boy. I can hear voices near us, you wouldn't want to lose to whoever they are, would you?"

He was right. There were voices in the air. I couldn't tell who was speaking or what they were saying, but they were nearby and moving in the same direction we were: towards the cave. It seemed we would be lucky in this gamble after all.

Giving up any sort of casual pace, Kouenji and I almost sprinted forwards towards the cave, in order to find a place to hide. If we could get into position before anyone arrived, if they claimed the spot it was an almost guarantee we would know who their leader was, or at least significantly narrow it down. I didn't think an entire class could move across the island this quickly, so it would have to be a small number of students.

Soon we arrived at what appeared to be a large hole in the mountainside: an entrance into the cave. At first glance it appeared to be a natural cave, but upon closer inspection the inside appeared properly reinforced. Perhaps the hole itself had been created by human hands.

The school had obviously put a lot of effort into shaping the island. There were tracks worn out to make it easier to move, and I hadn't yet seen any dangerous animals, or potential walking hazards. Overall, it was a relatively fabricated environment.

There was a large ring of bushes surrounding a clearing in front of the cave. Kouenji and I both found places to hide, and not long after, two students walked out of the forest into the small clearing.

"Woah, this place is amazing! Do you reckon it's a spot?!"

Yahiko was the first of the two to be seen. The fanatic sycophant of Katsuragi, and one of his last supporters in the class. I could see in his right hand a grey piece of plastic, almost identical to the one Chabashira had created for Horikita.

It was a foolish choice to choose someone like Yahiko to be leader. While I wasn't certain it was him just because he had the card in his hand, Katsuragi was the de facto leader of Class A for this holiday. Sakayanagi wasn't around and had apparently stepped aside for him for once, meaning he was in control. It would make sense for him to give one of his only supporters the role of leader, since he probably couldn't trust anyone else in the class.

And speaking of Katsuragi, here he was, following behind Yahiko

as he entered the clearing.

"It seems likely. The area looks fairly well made, but for now—"

"Sweet! I'm gonna claim it then. Class A can't lose with a spot this good!"

Yahiko, with absolutely no control, ran into the cave. Katsuragi, after being frozen at the stupidity for a moment, ran after him, both of them disappearing into the darkness.

"I have to admit I wasn't expecting that."

"Why you have any interest in competing against such incompetent people is beyond even my comprehension, Ayanokouji-boy."

Both Kouenji and I appeared shocked at the lack of concern Yahiko had shown before going to claim the spot.

"I understand he wouldn't have many options but appointing Yahiko as leader seems like a poor decision."

"Baldy-kun was in a corner. Either he's figured out the loophole or he's just as foolish as the other commoners."

Yes, there was a loophole in the leader rules. I didn't think Katsuragi had figured it out, due to his apparent attempt to hide Yahiko as leader. Or maybe he had figured it out, and also noticed Kouenji and I watching and planned accordingly to outplay our spying.

That was a pointless train of thought. Whether he had out-thought me was beyond understanding for now, although I suspected it was unlikely, and the truth would be revealed in the next few days.

We made our way out of hiding, moving to stand in the center of the clearing, pretending we had only just arrived.

"This is an impressive location."

"I must concur with you, Ayanokouji-boy. If we can claim it for our class we'd have a huge advantage."

Hearing voices, Katsuragi exited the cave warily, his hand clutching the key card in a poor attempt to hide it behind his back. Clearly realising that he had been caught he had taken it off Yahiko before trying to pretend like he was a leader-in-hiding.

"Ayanokouji-kun and Kouenji-kun, right? What brings you all the way out here?"

"We were just exploring. I thought this might be a spot, but it seems like you got here first."

"It looks like Baldy-kun is the leader for Class A then. What a blunder, but I shouldn't have expected more from mere mortals."

"In a cave this size, we should have enough room for two tents, Katsuragi-san. We sure were lucky. We secured a spot really quickly."

Yahiko finally exited the cave, probably having taken a look around based on his words.

"Hey, you two! What're you doing here! This is Class A territory, you better leave!"

I could see the frustration on Katsuragi's face at Yahiko's obvious blunder.

"Hahaha, Class A territory is it? What does that tell you, Ayanokouji-boy?"

"Wouldn't that mean that one of you two is the leader then?"

Katsuragi's face tightened, although he probably already knew we would suspect the two of them.

Yahiko however, had no control over himself.

"What are you talking about! How could you know that for sure!"

"Thank you for the confirmation, Yahiko."

"Green-hair-kun seems to be lacking any form of brains. How you got into Class A is beyond even a perfect existence's comprehension."

It was beyond me as well. Someone like Yahiko would have been more suited to Class C. He wasn't that intelligent and lacked reasoning or physical skills to back it up, but he also didn't seem to be as defective as the rest of our class, more just inferior to most Class A students. He was a perfect follower.

"I don't suppose it matters how dumb Yahiko is when his leader is foolish enough to be caught holding the Keycard. I Guess we're putting down Katsuragi for Class A. It seems they won't be receiving many Class Points."

"Hahahaha Baldy-kun really is an idiot, to go around with the keycard like that. I can understand why Sakayanagi is the Class A leader, and not this pathetic mongrel."

Kouenji had caught on to the idea with me. Yahiko had absolutely no self-control and a complete loyalty to Katsuragi. It wouldn't take much to break him, and toying with him was fun for now.

"How dare you! Katsuragi-san is smarter than either of you! And that bitch isn't in charge of Class A, only idiots would think that!"

"Yahiko, be quiet." Katsuragi had realised the dangers of this situation and that we were targeting Yahiko. But unfortunately, his subordinate had ignored his warning.

"Katsuragi-san figured out the hint on the boat! I bet you two just turned up out of luck, but no one else can match Katsuragi-san!"

"You mean that pathetic announcement about the scenery?"

"Or the inside information he had on Sakayanagi's absence?"

"Which one is it Yahiko?"

"Because we clearly figured it out much faster than you did."

"You lack the self-control to properly serve your leader."

"By running into that cave with the card in your hand to claim it, we know you're the leader."

"If only you had used your pathetic excuse of a brain and exercised some caution."

"It's your fault that we now have confirmation that it's your name on that keycard."

"Congratulations on dooming your class, you creature."

Our constant battering seemed to have broken Yahiko. His face had crumpled at the repeated attacks towards him, with no way to respond. He looked close to tears as the insults continued towards him.

"Please silence yourselves. I can accept fishing for information, but your actions are bordering on verbal abuse, which I will not stand for."

Katsuragi halted our verbal barrage. Unfortunate, since I was having fun, and by breaking Yahiko enough he would have a difficult time over the next seven days acting as leader and securing spots, even though he knew it wouldn't matter.

Because he had to continue securing spots. There was a chance that his name wouldn't be put down, or that other classes wouldn't learn it so gathering spot points was essential. Also, they couldn't risk another class stealing their base while it was occupied. The location they stayed at, at least, would have to be secured so they weren't forced to move.

They also couldn't tell their classmates about this. If the Class A students learned that their leader had been exposed in the first hour of the exam there would be a revolution of sorts. A much better solution would be to wait until the results were shown and hope that the point calculations weren't read out.

Kouenji too had soured at Katsuragi's interruption.

"Very well. Just know that we will be gracing the other classes with our presence and blessing them with this glorious information discovered by two perfect beings."

"You have a high opinion of yourselves."

It was understandable for Katsuragi to think this way, but soon he would accept the fact that we simply on another level. It wasn't ego, and I wasn't trying to rub it in, it was a fact the other students would need to accept before competing against us.

"Enjoy your defeat, Katsuragi."

With that parting blow, Kouenji and I left the two broken men behind in the clearing. Yahiko was crying a little at having failed Katsuragi so completely, and Katsuragi had an unreadable expression on his face, trying to figure out if there was any hope of

salvaging this situation.

Of course, there was a way to do so, but I didn't expect him to figure it out. He wasn't the sort of man to try such a radical method, but even if he did, I had an alternative method to beat him.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

It was an hour later when the class finally found me.

I had been napping when I woke to the sound of voices, the dysfunctional parade that was Class D arriving at the spot I had been waiting at.

Kouenji and I had made our way back down to the beach. Avoiding our class, a relatively easy task since they were still there arguing over the same topics as they were when we left half an hour ago, we made our way down to the impartial testers. Kouenji put on an impressive performance about his injuries, of which they couldn't find any, but since they had to respect his claims, he was allowed to retire from the exam and returned to the boat, costing Class D a 30-point penalty.

I however, cost much less, and purchased a hammock for 2 points.

I had left the beach for the second time and followed what was the most likely path Class D would follow, being the easiest to walk along, before coming across a river and grove that would make an easy camping spot. I felt comfortable in guessing that they would end up there, and my hunch was proven right when Ike ran up with wide eyes, exclaimed for joy at his luck and turned around tearing his way back towards the beach.

So, knowing they would probably end up here, I set up my hammock high in a tree and took a nap, waiting for them to arrive.

I had placed the pile of corn I collected from the corn field on the ground next to the keypad to secure the spot.

"Oi, Ayanokouji! What are you doing up there!"

Ah, the end of my short peace.

Time to face the exam once more.

Authors Notes:

This chapter was a lot of fun. I always thought there was more that could happen with Class A in the island exam, so not a lot more stuff will happen but they're gonna have a more interesting time. I'm pretty happy with this chapter and where this arc is going overall. Things are shaping up nicely as i write, so always a positive moment when things come together.

I do have many assignments due this week. I have written ahead a few chapters, so I won't be doing any more writing this week until the assignments are done, but that means I lose my buffer. It existed

for this sort of event, but from now on I'm writing without chances to be lazy. Just a heads up, probably no deviations from schedule but anythings possible.

I gave Kouenji some development here. I'm pretty sure it's not canon, but I could see this as being a very real reason he is the way he is. Parental pressure is not something to joke about, so it makes a lot of sense to me.

I actually have my list of notes written this time so lets get started with the big news of the week for the fandom.

Spoilers here for anyone not up to date with light novels and spoilers before Y2V5, though I don't know why you'd be reading this when there's more canon stuff to read, so go read that now.

WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING TO MY QUEEN

Fucking hell if Kushida is gone I'm gonna be so upset. From this point forth I dedicate Chaoskouji to the memory of Kushida as a decent character, as unrealistic as that dream is. So much potential and such a cool character idea all driven down into 'haha expel everyone go brrr'. It's quite frankly upsetting, and while I can't judge until the volume comes out, if this is the end for Kushida it's going to be disappointing no matter how good the novel is, simply because she's been ignored as a proper character for so long. This brings me into the biggest problem I have with COTE, something I'd never thought about before writing.

There are way too many fucking characters. Anyone who's written a fic knows this, there's so many characters and almost none of them have gotten any development. Every single light novel introduces new characters, giving them a cool concept and depth, before they are degraded into a one focus sort of character without any depth. It's insane how many there are. Sure the early books are less interesting, but at least there's a clear focus on a few characters. It's ridiculous how many characters have been reduced to one facet of their potential simply because there's no way to have that many characters and make them interesting. That's why if Kushida is gone it's gonna piss me off. As someone who's written tens of thousands of words about her character, losing her after she gets zero development despite being the third? fourth? character ever mentioned (Ayanokouji Koueji Kushida Horikita i think is the order) is such a shame.

Jesus this is long authors notes. It's just stuff I really wanted to put into words since it's my biggest and only real problem with the series. It made me genuinely upset to see that image from the upcoming novel, and this is why. I just wanted to get it off my chest, and see if anyone else agrees with me. I'd like to hear other opinions on this.

As always, hope you enjoyed the chapter, and thanks for putting up with my rant!

Arc 3 Chapter 4 - Setting up camp

"Oi, Ayanokouji! What are you doing up there!"

"Sleeping. Isn't that obvious?"

I was being facetious but I had no intention of dealing with my classmates today. If they wanted to set up a proper campsite that was up to them. I would win the exam, and in return the least they could do was leave me alone.

I couldn't tell them that though, without giving away my intentions.

"But where'd you get the hammock?"

Ike was the one questioning me now. It seemed he'd taken somewhat of a leadership position in the class, which surprised me. I wondered how that happened, but it didn't really matter.

"I bought it. We're here for a holiday, right? So, I spent two points to relax."

That was not the right answer apparently. The entire class had now reached the campsite, and upon hearing my opinion they began to yell again. Apparently, the arguments hadn't been resolved, just suppressed.

"Don't waste points, dumbass!" "This is our chance to get ahead of the other classes!" "If he can have a hammock why can't the girls have a toilet!"

The divide between the girls and boys had only deepened in my absence. All of this yelling was getting on my nerves.

"Everyone be quiet!" Surprisingly the class quieted down at my voice. "Food costs 5 points to feed the class for a meal, right? I found two days' worth of corn, it's just down there. So don't yell at me about my hammock."

I laid back down in it, not paying attention to the classmates below me. Really, this was ridiculous. I saved them 30 points and cost two. In actuality the amount of corn there should be enough for the entire week, but I didn't think there was ever a chance the entire class could ration themselves on minimal amounts of food for a week without losing their sanity. A shame.

The class was quiet for a bit after what I had said, probably weighing pros and cons of whether my actions were acceptable. Kikyou was the first to speak up.

"I think it's ok. Good job getting the food, Kiyotaka-kun, it's a

huge help!" Good work Kikyou.

Most of the class seemed to agree with her, and started moving again heading towards the card reader, and began setting up the meagre equipment they had. Horikita claimed the spot, and the boys and girls began setting up the two tents they had with them. I could see Kikyou in the middle of everything, issuing orders and talking with Yukimura and Ike.

She must be hating the situation, but at the same time she was the queen bee of Class D. There weren't many people questioning or hesitating with her orders, leaving her in firm control of the class. I had told her to not let them spend many points, but this was more than I had expected.

I would have to congratulate her later, but in the meantime, I had to deal with the last few annoyances below me.

"Ayanokouji, get down from there. And give us the hammock."

What?

"Yeah, you don't need it, so give it to us girls. Isn't it a man's job to make sacrifices for us?"

Karuizawa and Shinohara were waiting below me, demanding me give up what was mine. The audacity of these two was impressive, if not incredibly irritating.

"No."

"Give it to us, Ayanokouji! I'm not sleeping on the ground."

"So I should?"

"Like Karuizawa said, you should make sacrifices for us! Now get down and go help out the others."

"Neither of you are helping," I pointed out. They just wanted an excuse to not do work. Also, I didn't think either of them were capable of climbing the tree high enough to reach my hammock.

"That's not the point! Just because you got some corn you think you're special! Hirata tell him!"

Now this would be interesting. Ever since the Sudou and Sakura incident, Hirata had been withdrawn and sullen, uninterested in interacting with anyone. The only person he ever really spoke to was Karuizawa, and even then, it was infrequent.

People had a lot of different theories about what was going on with him, ranging from Karuizawa being abusive, rumours he actually took effort to squash out, to the death of a family member, and those he just ignored. I however, subscribed to a much simpler idea.

There were two times that Hirata had acted in a different manour, both of them in high intensity moments, when the truth of who a person is can be revealed. The first was the first day of school, when I spent time with Kouenji putting down the defectives.

The second was when Chabishira informed us that we were worthless students.

Both of these times were in defense of another classmate. I was simply of the opinion, and so were a few others but not many, that he simply couldn't cope with what happened to Sakura. It was as simple as that, the incident had broken something inside of him, and he had become withdrawn simply from that.

Why, I didn't know, but I was confident in my reason. And that reaction led to Hirata becoming practically a non-entity in the class. Karuizawa even had been acting distant from him, as if abandoning him due to his change. It was understandable. They were already central figures in the grade and had probably been dating partially as status. Being attached to him as he was now a risk to her status, so Karuizawa may be testing how long his new attitude would last, before breaking it off with him.

I had no idea about any of her actions revolving around status. That was simply how Kikyou explained it to me when I asked, but it made a lot of sense once she did.

"Leave it, Karuizawa. He can have a hammock..."

Hirata responded in the listless lifeless way he had been for the past month.

"Don't you care, Hirata! I don't want to sleep on the ground!"

"I'm sure Kikyou will figure something out, I doubt she wants to sleep on the ground either."

"Shut up Ayanokouji! Fine, keep your hammock, let's go Shinohara."

"Yeah, we don't want to hang around with such a big loser anyway"

The moved off to follow the rest of the class, probably trying to weazle themselves out of work by getting in Kikyou's good graces. They were huge hypocrites, complaining about me, before proceeding to do exactly the same.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun..." I perked up at hearing Hirata speak. This would be the first time he had spoken to me since Sudou's trial, although I also hadn't made any attempts to speak to him. "No, never mind..."

Or not.

I guess today wasn't the day. He clearly had something he wanted to talk about, so eventually he would come to me. There was no need to pressure him.

But for now, I may as well help out a little.

I untied one end of the hammock and grabbed onto the other tree it was attached to before untying that end around. Clambering to the ground, I grabbed the hammock and tied it around my body

instead.

It was incredibly cumbersome, but I didn't want anyone stealing it, especially seeing how many people had appeared to want it.

Hammock-chan was mine.

I made my way over to Kikyou, who was still in the middle of giving out tasks. Nothing had been purchased yet, but I suspected a long list of items was growing during the conversation she was having with Yukimura and Ike.

"Look who finally got down from his throne," she said teasingly as I reached them. I decided to play along.

"Reporting for duty, ma'am." I gave her a mock salute, which got a giggle out of Kikyou and a glare from Ike.

"I told you not to try anything, Ayanokouji! Back off!" Really, you want to do this here, in front of people.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ike."

"Hmm, fine, I'll let it slide now. But know your place, you've got no chance with Kikyou-chan!" He gave me a scathing glare as he said that. Yukimura simply stood there in silence looking extremely uncomfortable, and Kikyou was doing an impressive job of pretending to not hear our conversation.

Ike didn't realise, simply because he didn't know the real Kikyou, that she was unable to ever have a boyfriend. It didn't matter if I made moves on her, or if she fell completely in love with Ike, she would never be able to choose one person, lest the rest of the school stop loving her so much. Her desire to be loved the most by everyone meant she had to be eternally available, and eternally alone.

It was a cruel existence she had brought upon herself. Perhaps that's why she enjoyed my company so much.

"Kanji-kun, could you go try and find some food? You said you had a good grasp of foraging from camping, didn't you?" Ike brightened at the suggestion, giving him a chance to show his usefulness.

"Sure thing, Kikyou-chan! I'll go find plenty of food, more than Ayanokouji did!" And with that he sprinted off into the jungle, probably to find a few berries. From what I had seen, there wasn't much food at all on the island. Otherwise we wouldn't have been given so many points for food.

"Yukimura-kun, you can take a break now, you've been a big help with planning. I just need to talk to Kiyotaka-kun for a moment."

Yukimura relaxed, having reached the end of his negotiations for point expenditure. It was a fine line to walk, without annoying the extremist boys or girls, but it seemed they had made good progress, surprisingly.

"Thanks, Kushida-san. If you need any more help with the calculations just ask."

He had taken a very mature approach. It seemed he was a much calmer and more reasonable person once given the chance to use his brain, unlike his outbursts in class. All the arguments I had heard him make had been logical ones, nothing borne out of emotion. Perhaps he was more reliable than I had thought.

"I'm surprised. I told you to make sure they didn't spend too many points, but I didn't think you'd establish a monarchy."

"It just sort of happened. Everyone listened to me when I spoke up, and it worked from there."

"Surely you could have deferred to someone else. Isn't being the leader in this situation something you'd want to avoid?"

"There's no one else to lead, now that Hirata's fucking dead. You aren't wrong though," she said begrudgingly. "The entire class is completely split on how to spend points, and I have to pick sides, without making people annoyed at me. It's fucking impossible to manage."

It was a complex situation she had gotten herself into. Kikyou needed to be loved by everyone and being a leader making tough decisions was the antithesis of that ideal. Unfortunately, now that Hirata was useless there was no one else to pick up the mantle of class leader. Kikyou would inevitably alienate some people, a result she was desperately trying to avoid through compromise.

"What do you think of this plan for points?" She passed me an empty page torn from the rule book, probably added in to help us plan such things.

It was impressively organised and calculated, Yukimura's influence I suspected, outlining necessities, such as food and two more tents, and minimum to maximum amounts acceptable to spend on all possible requirements. Overall, after taking into account reduced food needs from the corn, it was looking to be around 100 points to live frugally for the next week.

"It's not a bad plan. Like I said though, spending points doesn't matter. You should also account for the fact that Kouenji retired."

Her face turned shocked at my addition to the calculations.

"He WHAT? How did that happen?"

"I didn't think that would shock you so much. He's Kouenji. He doesn't care, so I don't know what you expected him to do."

She grumbled a little at that, brow slightly furrowed as she reconsidered what the class was going to do down 30 points.

"I suppose there's nothing you can do to stop that idiot. God, I can't get a read on him no matter how hard I try." I'm not surprised at this. Kouenji is one of the best people I've ever met at hiding his

true intentions. Mostly because most of the time he isn't hiding them, and it's impossible to tell the 1% when he is.

"I'm surprised Ike is being so useful. How in the world did that happen?"

I wanted answers about him. I had previously marked him as dead weight, but now it seemed he might have a use.

"Apparently he went camping a bunch as a kid. Seriously though, if I knew that pervert would end up being useful, I wouldn't have made myself so leaderlike. If I have to plan with him all week, I might lose it. Fucking Hirata being depressed and useless, if he just got over himself I wouldn't have to do this bullshit."

Luckily, we were far enough away from other people. I highly doubted Kikyou would ever let herself lose when other people were in earshot, but this week would be a test of herself control. It was unlikely she would have a chance to vent while camping in a small area without being heard.

"I wouldn't count on Hirata to do anything useful."

"Mm. Do you have a plan yet?" She really seemed hung up on a plan to win.

"Like I said, there's no point making plans. I'm just going to wait for everyone else to make mistakes. This is the other classes game to lose."

A lot of people when they played any sort of game played to win. It was a valid strategy, trying to outmatch and defeat your opponent, and worked well enough. But it was in my opinion that the most effective strategy was to let your opponent play to lose, for yourself to play to not lose. Trying to win is pointless unless you are up against an opponent far beyond you. A truly capable person will not try to win but exploit their opponents' mistakes. That was the strategy I was employing, and as evidenced with Class A, it was an effective one.

Don't try to win. Wait until your opponent loses.

"Eh, whatever. You're the super genius, it's on you. I just do as I'm told."

"Stop being cheeky, it doesn't suit."

"It doesn't? I was sure I was making it work." She gave me a cute smile in response.

"Yes, you're cute. Now get over it." Kikyou blushed slightly at my compliment, but I didn't have time nor the inclination for pleasantries. "What's Horikita been up to."

Kikyou's face soured at the mention of her nemesis.

"Nothing. She got a lot of abuse from the class for being leader despite doing nothing to ask for it, so thanks for that, it was entertaining. But besides from claiming the spot, she's mostly just

kept to herself. I thought she'd help out more."

"She's ill." Kikyou took a closer look at Horikita, before her eyes widened in surprise.

"She does look a little off. What do you want to do about it?"

"There's nothing much we can do. Just leave her alone for now, you can excuse her from work as long as she keeps claiming the spot. Eventually she'll break down."

A sadistic grin formed on Kikyou's face at the thought of Horikita collapsing from illness. What a sadist.

But before we could continue our conversation, I noticed something problematic in the campground.

"What are those idiots doing..."

"Who?"

"Ichihashi and Inogashira."

"They're collecting firewood for a bonfire."

That was obvious. But the problem was...

"All of that wood is damp. It's all useless."

"Does that matter? I didn't really think about it..."

"It's not too surprising that not many people know. If you've never been camping or done any survival training most people would never think about it."

"Well, I guess you better go correct their mistake, then"

I was not liking that smirk on Kikyou's face. She had figured out correctly that she could somewhat order me around while we were camping, and unless I wanted to be completely isolated from the class, I had to comply to a certain degree. Of course, I wasn't going to let this continue, but I suppose I did get down from my hammock to help. Just not in this manner.

"I guess I should."

With that, I left the smug devil to her problems and made my way over to the bonfire where Ichihashi and Inogashira had just placed another stack of twigs in a pile. They weren't even collecting the correct type of wood, but that was to be expected from inexperienced outdoors people.

"You realise all of this is useless, right?"

"Eh? Oh, Ayanokouji-kun it's you, what are you talking about?"

"All of this wood is damp, and none of it is thick enough to burn for longer than a few seconds. Basically, it can't be used at all."

Their faces fell at my statement, crushed by the knowledge that their work for the past half an hour was wasted.

"But... we spent so long getting it."

"Are you sure it can't be used, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Luckily for me, these two were some of the people in the class I didn't have friction with. We hadn't spoken more than once or

twice, but they didn't have any significant problems with me. I didn't feel like dealing with a grudge right now, so helping them out in particular was no problem.

"Yeah, it's worthless. Don't worry, Kikyou sent me over to help out, since I know a bit about camping." Not camping but survival skills, although the difference was negligible for now.

The relief on their faces was palpable at realising I was here to help them, not to just criticise their mistakes, especially Inogashira. From what I had seen, she was rather timid, so being kind and fixing mistakes instead of just pointing them out could get me into a favourable position in her mind especially. This could also prove an opportune moment to help out Kikyou if I played it right.

"Oh, thank god... I was worried we were in trouble."

"Yeah, at least it's Ayanokouji-kun helping, not that idiot Ike."

It seemed I was more favourable in their eyes than I had expected. Or Ike's insistence at being useful had brought him lower than before.

I led them away from the campsite back into the jungle of the island. Looking around for a moment, I eventually found a few examples of what to collect.

"You're looking for completely dry stuff like these. And a variety of sizes as well. You can't make a proper fire without some larger stuff."

They both thanked me, before moving off together to try and find more sticks. As I watched, I saw them still only collecting twigs, half of them still green.

I guess it's too much to ask for anyone to have decent experience building a campfire. Ike can just solve it later. At least I tried.

I made my way around slowly; collecting all the good twigs and branches I could find that the two sheltered girls had missed. There was a large amount of them, both twigs for starting the fire, along with some pretty solid tree branches that would be easy enough to snap and burn for a while, possibly even making decent enough coals to cook in. If we could avoid forking out points for an oven, I would prefer to do so, but I suspected most of the class would be opposed to cooking food over a fire when a perfectly good oven was available.

There would probably be another riot no matter which idea was suggested.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, could you come here for a second?"

Ichihashi called me over to where she was standing with Inogashira.

"Are these branches any good?"

To my surprise they were. It seemed they had quickly realised the

mistakes they had been making and dumped the bad sticks they had found. All of the sticks the two of them were carrying were dry as a bone, and completely dead, with none of the green they had been collecting previously.

I was very impressed at the sudden turn around.

"Yeah, those are great, they'll make a great fire. Good work."

They both smiled at the compliment, before starting to move to find more. It wasn't long before Inogashira broke the silence.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, why'd you come help us?"

"Yeah, I would've thought you'd just sleep in your hammock all day. You never seem to be interested in anything, so what gives?"

This was an opportunity I had been waiting for, but I didn't expect it to be presented to me so easily.

"Kikyou asked me to help out at least a little, and when I saw the fire was probably going to fail, I decided to help out. I'd rather not freeze tonight."

It was a valid reason, but I wasn't expecting Inogashira to lean over to Ichihashi and whisper something in her ear, before the two of them giggle.

"You're pretty close to Kushida-san then, aren't you Ayanokouji-kun? First names and everything? Could you two perhaps..."

"There's nothing between us. We're just friends." Rumours like that would be a huge problem, and I couldn't let them exist.

"Are you sure? I saw you two on the boat, you know? Standing next to each other, talking?"

"Almost something a couple would do, hmm?"

A surprise attack! I wasn't expecting the double battering ram of accusations from both of them. Especially given how shy Inogashira was, I didn't think she would be the one to tease. It seemed when in less company she was much more comfortable.

"It's nothing like that." I pretended to think for a moment, before glancing around us. This was the perfect way for me to place some niggling ideas in the back of the classes mind. "Can you two keep a secret?"

They both nodded frantically, probably enticed by the idea of a secret from such an enigma as me.

"So, are you dating? We won't tell." Ichihashi had a big grin on her face, but I quickly dispelled the idea.

"Actually, Kikyou's really worried."

Their faces fell at such a serious secret, considering they had been expecting a hidden relationship between us.

"Worried?"

"She doesn't want to be leader. It's a lot of pressure on her, and it's already getting really hard for her to make tough choices."

"Oh... I hadn't even though about that."

"She doesn't want to take a side or pick between friends, but you know our class, they all want different things. She's actually really stressed about it."

"I had no idea!"

"This must be really hard for her, I didn't even think how hard being the leader must be."

The worry was implanted in their minds now, so hopefully it could take root and give some leeway for Kikyou if she had to pick a side eventually.

"If you could just cut her a little slack, go a bit easy, it would be great. I'm worried about her, having to constantly deal with the annoying boys in our class."

It was a low blow to throw the boys under the bus, but by relating Kikyou's fake struggle to something that these two found to be a very real worry made her situation all the more believeable.

"Yeah, no problem."

"She's doing so much to help the class, it's the least we can do."

"Thanks a lot. Don't go telling people I said this, but if you can get anyone to ease up on her a little that would go a long way to helping her out."

They both nodded at that, happy to go along with my plan. That should give Kikyou a bit of leeway to make tough decisions without losing the trust of the girls at least. These two would probably be incapable of keeping it to themselves, but if the rumour got around that Kikyou was struggling, almost all the girls would lighten up the pressure on her, and I expected Kikyou to be able to act through a situation where someone got too personal and tried to comfort her about the struggle.

"See, Ayanokouji-kun, you do care about her. Soooo, are you just being a good friend or..."

"For the last time, Ichihashi, there's nothing happening. Just leave it."

She pouted at that, but gave up teasing me, at least for the time being.

As they turned away I noticed something odd out of the corner of my eye. No, not something, someone.

Ibuki Mio, if I remembered correctly.

One of Ryuuen's main supporters, but also one of the most outspoken people in the class. Apparently, she was very happy to inform him when she disagreed with his thoughts, and was just as happy following him around in his entourage pretending not to care otherwise.

There was a swollen red mark on her cheek, and her presence

here suggested that she had been kicked out of the Class C campsite. I didn't think this was the case, however. That injury wasn't likely something Ryuuen had done to an insubordinate classmate. It was far too obvious, and her presence here was also peculiar. If she had spoken back to him about whatever he planned to do, he would have injured her in a less visible manner. The mark on her cheek was meant to be seen. Also, I couldn't understand why she was here. If she had been kicked out, the best thing to do would be to return to the boat and retire.

It would cost Class C 10 points per day if she didn't retire, by missing roll call. That would amount to 60 points by the end of the week, where it was only 30 to retire. If Ryuuen wanted her gone, he would have forced her to retire. This was an obvious scheme to get a spy into our camp. Now all I had to do was ignore her, not let anyone find her and the entire plan would collapse.

"Hey, who're you! Are you okay?" God damn it Ichihashi.

"Just leave me alone. It's nothing."

"Doesn't look that way. Who did this to you? Should I call a teacher?"

Considering the swelling, it was easy to see that she was in a fair amount of pain. An impressive sacrifice on her part, if it was a scheme.

"Just a class dispute. Don't worry about it," answered Ibuki, laughing in self-deprecation. Her voice was low and even, but it was clear she wasn't feeling well. She seemed rather shaken. I had to commend her acting.

"So, what are you going to do? We just can't leave you here."

This was not our school campus. We were surrounded by jungle on all sides. In a couple hours, the sun would begin to set. If she were out here alone in the dark, it could be disastrous.

Despite that, there was no way we would bring her back to camp.

Actually, having a closer look...

"We're Class D students. Why not come to our camp?"

Inogashira and Ichihashi readily agreed with me, inviting Ibuki to get up and come stay with us. Their kindness here would work in my favour. If it had been one of the boys they might have been too suspicious and refused her, but these two were kind souls, willing to help a poor injured girl lost in the woods.

I would exploit that kindness.

"Huh? What are you saying? There's no way I could do something like that."

"Well, I mean, wouldn't you say it's only natural to help someone in trouble?" She seemed to not want to listen to us. She turned away and fell silent. In most situations it would've been easy to leave her,

but there was a significant advantage to assisting her for us.

"I'm from Class C. In other words, I'm your enemy. You understand that, right?"

That's exactly why I was helping her. There was dirt under her fingernails, a significant amount, more than would accumulate from simply moving through the jungle. She had buried something nearby, and I couldn't think what it could be. There was a pile of slightly disturbed earth nearby, where I suspected she had hidden whatever it was, and I wanted her away from this spot at least before figuring out what she hid.

"But we just can't leave you. Right?"

After pressuring her for a few minutes, she gave in. It was the most natural time length one would expect before an opponent would trust us enough to accept our help. She could have accepted our aid earlier, but that would have been far too suspicious, and any later and we may have given up. Ibuki had timed her move perfectly. She was an impressive student, I could see why Ryuuen kept her around.

"You guys are really stupid. You're not acting logically. You aren't thinking about your own class."

"We can't just leave you alone, especially since you're injured."

"But is that really okay? To tell me where your base camp is, and moreover, to guide me there?"

"Huh? Is that wrong?"

Ichihashi didn't understand what Ibuki was trying to say. Even when exploiting our foolishness, she still seemed shocked that it was working this well.

"I can't believe what an incredible idiot you are! Seriously, I can't believe it,"

If you knew the location of someone's campsite, you could start to get a read on how they planned to conduct themselves throughout the test. You could get into their heads and anticipate their strategies. In Class D's case, announcing our spot was a reason to be concerned. But I spoke up.

"Don't worry. I don't think it'll be a problem," I said.

"Uggh, fine, I'll come along to your campsite."

"Great! My name's Ichihashi, this is Inogashira-san and that's Ayanokouji-kun!"

"I'm... Ibuki."

With her final concession of her name, Ibuki rose, and we headed back to camp with the wood we had collected. She flatly refused to converse with us, neither explaining what happened to land her in this situation or allow us to carry her bag for her.

Once we got back, Kikyou noticed us and came over to greet us.

"Hey, you're back! And you got so much wood, awesome!"

"We brought a guest."

"Huh, what are you... Ibuki-san what happened to you!"

Noticing the red mark on Ibuki's face, Kikyou exclaimed her shock at seeing her here. At her yell, most of the class turned to see what was happening.

"We found her sitting against a tree. Whatever happened must have really hurt, so Ichihashi offered to let her stay here."

By now, some of our classmates had gotten up and made their way over, looking at Ibuki with suspicion. At least some people have enough brains to suspect this was a test against the other classes and trusting her could be risky.

They didn't need to yell at her though.

"We don't need another person here!" "You can't trust her, she's from Class C" "Yeah, we don't want her here."

For the first time since entering this school, I actually agreed with the mob mentality of my class. It was impressive seeing them grow, like a parent having raised a child. Or perhaps they hadn't grown at all and were just naturally antagonistic.

That seemed more accurate.

Kikyou was also looking confused, probably suspecting Ibuki as a spy as well. Wondering why I had allowed her to be brought here, she deferred to my decision.

"What do you think, Kiyotaka-kun?"

The class stopped to listen to the opinion their angel requested. Apparently despite my attitude towards them, my words still held a bit of weight.

"I don't trust her, but it's getting late. We can't make her leave in the dark, so I think it would be okay to let Ibuki stay the night and we decide in the morning."

It was a blatant compromise between those who were for and those who were against Ibuki. I had taken the fence sitter line that no one else wanted to, giving them all a chance to agree with me.

"In that case, Ibuki-san, it seems the class is in agreement! You can stay for tonight, at least." There were some grumbles, since the class very clearly wasn't in agreement, but no one was bold enough to go against Kikyou's decision.

Now that the situation was dealt with, I dumped the sticks I had collected where the bonfire was going to be, leaving it to Ike to build and start, before heading back to my two trees.

Some of my classmates watched in awe as I shimmied up a tree with just my legs, untied the hammock from around my body, and tied it around one end, before repeating the process for the other tree.

It was reasonably heavy to carry on my body that way, but with the amount of people enviously eyeing the hammock I had no choice but to defend it with my life.

Hammock-chan was mine.

I laid back down in my hammock, resting for the moment and enjoying the cool island breeze brushing past the opening of the hammock. This island vacation really was just that, a vacation. If only more people could see it that way, we could have a nice holiday instead of trying to compete.

It was from there that I heard the shouts of exclamation and a commotion brewing from below. It seemed someone had asked Chabashira where Kouenji was, to which she replied with the truth; Kouenji had retired from the exam.

They didn't seem to be taking the news well.

Good. The campsite had been feeling much too united to be Class D. This disjointed distrust was much easier to work with that a pale representation of Class B.

If there was one class who was likely to come last on this test, it was Class B.

Authors Notes:

I'm having a bit of fun with the hammock, but I can definitely see the class having problems with it just because they're so stupid.

Kushida can't be a true leader, as I said in the story. It's her one weakness, because she can't take sides, meaning that in this situation where there needs to be a leader and no one else is stepping up is going to be rough for her.

Finally Hirata is back and he's fucking dead. I've written a cool chat he has with Ayanokouji, so I'm going to see what happens with him too. The number of characters I'm working with just keeps expanding so its fun but I'll make sure to control that.

Despite Ayanokouji trying to pretend like they aren't associated standing on a boat together is kinda sus. Obviously there will be some questions, but I'm working that out as I go for the moment.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 5 - Class C

I woke up in the middle of the night, when my body sensed some danger near me. I could hear the rustle of the grass as multiple people, I wasn't sure how many, were walking around, growing closer to me before stopping directly underneath my hammock.

I could hear their voices now, not enough to distinguish who they were, but I could tell it was two people. Clearly, they planned something to do with me, but what could they be after at 1 in the morning?

"Get on."

"Ok, I'm ready."

"Are you sure you can handle this?"

"Oof, you're pretty big. Just give me a moment. Ok, you can go now."

"Gnnn, this is rough."

"Sorry, I'm doing my best."

"Are you close?"

"I'm almost there... I'm so close, just a little longer..."

I gave up any pretence of sleeping and leaned over the side of my hammock to see what was going on.

"What are you two idiots doing now?"

Ike and Yamauchi collapsed in a heap on the ground at their surprise of me being awake.

"Ayanokouji! What are you doing awake right now! It's the middle of the night."

"Yeah, what gives! Trying to spy on us?"

"I was asleep until you two came and woke me up, so it seems I'm the one who is owed an explanation."

They looked at each other guiltily, fidgeting, before Ike finally answered.

"We were trying to get your hammock."

That had been obvious. I had seen Yamauchi standing on Ike's shoulders, boosted up high enough so that he could try and untie my hammock from the tree. As soon as I had spoken, Ike had given out in shock and the two of them had fallen on top of each other.

"Seriously, leave it alone. It's the middle of the night, go back to sleep."

"It's not fair! How come you get a hammock and we have to sleep in a tent with stupid ugly boys!"

"So, you are sleeping with your people, then?"

"What?" It seemed they were too sleep deprived to comprehend what I had just said.

"God, the two of you are stupid. Did you really think I wouldn't notice if you stole my hammock while I slept in it?"

"Well... I suppose..."

"Go back to bed, you defective morons. You can't have my hammock, is that really so hard to understand?"

This was getting ridiculous.

"Fine. But we will get your hammock eventually! You can't guard it forever!"

"Yeah! Don't test us, Ayanokouji, or I'll have to force you to stay away from Kikyou-chan."

He was still on about that. Well, their value had been determined in my mind, thanks to this. Ike had provided useful skills and had been generally beneficial to the class this exam, but it wasn't enough to make him worth anything in our class.

Yamauchi... the less said about him the better.

The two perverts made their way back to the tent they were staying in. Before night, we had purchased two extra tents, each holding eight people comfortably as well. This meant that my squishing up together, we had managed to get everyone inside a tent, except for me, as I insisted on sleeping outside in my hammock.

Once I was sure they were gone, and not just waiting for another surprise attack, I let myself fall back to sleep, resetting my body clock to wake me up early. I had some investigating I wanted to get done and getting up early would be the best way to do so.

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At 5am I woke up naturally as I had intended before I was rudely interrupted in the night. The morning rays of the sun were just beginning to come up, but not enough that they would awaken anybody except for those who had a very early schedule already trained into themselves.

I climbed down from my hammock, wrapping it around my body just like before, in order to move around without anyone stealing it. It was a frustrating and inefficient thing to have to do, but I didn't have enough faith in Kikyou's class control in order to believe it would be safe from the likes of even her most fanatic followers Ike and Yamauchi.

I set out to the location where we had originally found Ibuki. More specifically, the disturbed earth where I suspected she had

buried something. It didn't take long, but the hardest part was locating where she had been digging with the feeble light struggling to stream through the trees.

Eventually I found the spot that she had been digging at. It was, as I had suspected, an attempt to hide something in the ground. I set to work and dug up whatever Ibuki had wanted to be kept hidden. She hadn't buried whatever it was deeply, so I quickly found a waterproof bag hidden in the ground.

It was rather heavy, for such a small bag, containing only two items.

I camera and a walkie-talkie.

Obviously, this was proof Ibuki was a spy. I had kept a little bit of doubt at my theory, but this was conclusive evidence that she was planning something. I suspect her purpose was to find the name of our leader, as there was no real other objective in this exam.

But I couldn't figure out why she had a camera. The walkie talkie was obvious, she needed to remain in communication with Ryuuen. But did he not trust her enough to tell what the name of the leader was? No, that seemed unlikely. There was no reason for Ibuki to betray him, so there must be some other reason for needing physical evidence of who the leader is.

It was pointless contemplating what she had been planning for now. It was only the dawn of the second day, and there were still five more days of the exam to go. I had pleanty of time to figure out what Ryuuen's strategy was and exploit it.

The only thing that mattered now was that Ibuki had to go.

I couldn't have Ryuuen learning the name of our leader, at least not in a way that didn't give me an advantage by giving up the information. I didn't think that she had figured out who the leader was yet, but even if she had, she hadn't had a chance to report back to Ryuuen.

It was unfortunate, but people trip all the time while unsupervised on an island.

When I returned to the campsite, there was another person awake.

Horikita, doing her job as leader, had timed her sleep to wake up just before the spot ran out of time. She had made her way over to the keypad, and I watched from nearby as she swiped the keycard to reclaim our spot. Even though she was ill, and it was worse than it had been yesterday from what I could see, she was still doing her job diligently.

"Horikita." I called out to her, making her jump in shock as she realised I was there.

"Ayanokouji-kun. I didn't realise you were awake."

"Good work securing the spot. You'll make a great leader yet."

She glared at me angrily at my compliment. Obviously, she wasn't happy with her role, or perhaps unhappy that I had given it to her.

"What do you want, Ayanokouji-kun. You aren't the type to give out compliments."

"You're right. Take a look at this, I found it buried near where we found Ibuki yesterday."

I passed Horikita the bag, watching as her eyes narrowed on seeing the contents inside of it.

"She's a spy. It was obvious from the start, but this is evidence now." A smirk grew on her face as she realised something. "And you were the one who let her stay. I bet you feel foolish now."

She passed the bag back to me, the smug smile still on her face, sadistically pleased to find a moment when I failed. Unfortunately for you, I didn't.

"I live by the saying 'keep your enemies close'. Obviously, I found it suspicious, but I could keep a closer eye on her this way."

"I suppose that's true. What do we do now?"

"'We' do nothing. If you can just wake her up and get her out of the tent, then I will deal with Ibuki myself."

She stared at me, trying to figure out what I was planning to do.

"And what if I told you I didn't trust you to handle it?"

Horikita made it clear how she felt about me. I wasn't someone she could trust or rely on in the class, especially since I pushed the role of leader onto her. She must suspect I have ulterior motives, and is for that reason on guard around me.

"Then I would say I'm impressed. Don't trust me, Horikita. I don't have the best intentions towards our class. The only person I work for is me."

Her face instantly closed off, and she took a step away from me. It was good to see her being hesitant to trust an unknown factor, but in her current state she wouldn't pose any threat.

"But don't worry. In this case, at least, I'm working for the class."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I expect you to wake Ibuki and let me handle it."

She took a moment, mulling over before sighing and letting the stress out of her body slightly. The tense posture she had been holding herself with moments ago had vanished somewhat.

"Fine. I don't understand you Ayanokouji-kun, but there are easier ways to betray the class. I'll trust you with Ibuki."

There was nothing more that needed to be said. I waited outside, near the dead embers of last night fire for a few minutes, before a bleary-eyed Ibuki made her way out of the tent we had let her stay in.

"Ayanokouji-kun? What do you want?"

"Let's take a walk."

Ibuki looked around hesitantly for a moment, before moving to follow me as we headed away from the campsite into the jungle.

"What's this about? I was pretty comfortable sleeping."

"You're not the most gracious guest, are you? I let you stay at our camp, so I feel you should show me a little more respect."

"Hmph. I didn't ask to stay at your camp, you were the ones who made me."

We'd reached far enough away from the campsite now that no one would hear us. We were also close enough to the boat and the beach that I wouldn't have to carry Ibuki too far. I didn't particularly feel like putting in more effort than I needed to, so getting her to walk part of the distance was a positive.

"Yes, I suppose we did. It's a shame you turned out to be a spy."

I held up the bag I'd dug up from earlier.

"Tch, so you found out."

"I can't have you finding our leaders name. You're done, Ibuki."

She smirked at me suddenly, all the confidence she could muster returning to her body. Her posture straightened, and she took on a fighting stance.

"Then I guess I'll have to remove you as an obstacle. I've got my own problems, and I can't let you mess this up."

She launched herself at me with an impressive attempt at a grab. Ibuki was strong, a quick fighter who had clearly had some training previously. It wasn't a threat to me however, so I took the fight slowly at first, just trying to clumsily dodge her blows.

"You want to fight then, Ibuki? I'm pretty confident I can beat you."

"Shut up, you piss me off! Stop dodging then and fight me!"

She launched herself at me with an impressively executed kick. I had two options in this fight. One, I could end it as fast as possible. One blow would be all it took to knock her out, and she would probably chalk it up to a lucky hit.

The other option was to pretend I wasn't as good as I was. If I could fake being less experienced at fighting, and get some lucky blows, perhaps play dirty and throw some dirt at her to win, she would lower her expectations of my skills.

The second option was a good choice, in the event we had future engagements. Lowering her guard of my skill could be useful, but it was too risky in this situation. So instead, I went for option one.

As her leg flew at me, I moved my head slightly to the side. At the same time, I grabbed her ankle and pulled it to the side. I saw her face flash with confusion, before I dragged her down out of her

flight and onto the ground. Her face registered the pain she was in for a moment, before I gave a powerful blow to her temple.

It would probably bruise, and she might have a small concussion, but there wasn't anything seriously dangerous about the wound I had given her.

Ibuki had lost consciousness at my blow and was lying crumpled on the ground. She was a good fighter, I had to admit. I doubted there would be many high school students who could match her blow for blow, but unfortunately for her I was one of them.

I returned to camp about half an hour after I had left it with Ibuki. There were more people awake now, milling around the campsite not doing much of anything. Probably half of the class was awake, while the other half were pretending to still be asleep. It was a thing many people had trouble adjusting to with camping. Even if you were normally a night owl, it was necessary to go to bed early and rise early, because the sun dictated your life. For the next seven days everyone would have to choose between an early night or not enough sleep.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun, where'd you run off too?" Kikyou was one of the people who was awake, unsurprisingly. As de-facto leader she needed to be up in order to coordinate breakfast.

"I was dealing with our spy problem."

"Spy?" Kikyou looked around, and her eyes widened when she noticed Ibuki was missing. "Where'd Ibuki go?"

"Unfortunately, she tripped and hit her head against a rock several times. It's a shame, but she had to retire."

"How tragic." Kikyou had a massive smile on her face that didn't match her words at all.

"She was annoying you I take it?"

"No, no not at all. It was lovely to have her here. It was better than leaving her someplace she could get hurt. I'm just glad she's retired now. There's nowhere safer than on the boat."

"You're not wrong there."

We exchanged a few more pleasantries, keeping up the act of friends in front of everyone else in the class. I moved away after a bit, grabbed my breakfast ration and set my hammock back up in the trees again.

I planned to visit Ryuuen later today. I wanted to see what he was planning, and if I could figure out how to turn it to my advantage. For now, however, I would catch up on the sleep I lost from the two idiots last night.

Or so I had planned.

Because it seemed that every class in our year had been cursed with two idiots.

"Wow, you Class D rejects are really living frugal, eh? I guess that's what I'd expect from a class of defectives."

Kondou Reo and Suzuki Hitedoshi had appeared at our campsite for who knows what reason. They were both stuffing their faces with chips and guzzling down soft drink.

"Looks like you're living the high life, Class C."

Kondou flinched when he saw me, probably remembering the trial. While he recomposed himself, Suzuki took the opportunity to talk down on us some more.

"What did you even eat for breakfast? Grass? Or maybe bugs? Here, you can have some snacks."

They took a bag of potato chips and tossed it near Ike's feet as he drew nearer. Though it was obvious that they were trying to start something, Class D couldn't help getting irritated.

"We have a message from Ryuuen-san. If you want to enjoy your summer vacation to the fullest, come to the beach right now. Don't hang back. If you're sick of living like idiots, then we're happy to share our luxuries."

They didn't leave but continued snacking as if trying to harass us. Ike snapped at them, but they didn't seem to care. The provocation continued for at least ten more minutes, until Hirata finally mustered up the effort to make a move, and Class C decided to call it quits quite quickly after that.

They headed back toward their campsite, but before they left, they issued one more statement.

"All of you are free to come join us if you want, but Ayanokouji Kiyotata," Suzuki pointed directly at me, "Ryuuen wants to see you personally, so you'd better come visit."

I didn't dignify them with a response. Ryuuen would understand that I wouldn't turn down his invitation but broadcasting my intentions would be a foolish idea.

I had been anticipating a meeting with Ryuuen for some time. I had no interest in seeking him out myself, but after my interference in his little plan earlier in the year, I had been expecting him to want to talk to me again. We had only met face to face once before, and I hadn't given him anything to go on about me, so he would be dying for another chance to get a read on me and my plans.

"I wonder what they meant about sharing luxuries?"

"Yeah, and where did they get those chips?"

"Don't tell me they spent points on them."

The class had fallen into discussion about the visit from the troublemakers of Class C. For once they were actually asking good questions, trying to understand what Komiya and Suzuki had told us, but they wouldn't get anywhere just asking questions.

"What does Ryuuen want with Ayanokouji?"

"Yeah, isn't that a little suspicious? What if he's betraying us?"

And suspicion rose against me. This was probably something Ryuuen had expected as a result of calling me out and was another benefit of naming me specifically. He figured that I was one of if not the most dangerous people to his plans in Class D, so he was trying to target my credibility. It would be much harder to win an exam with my class against me.

I should thank him. Their lack of faith in me from this would only help.

"Oh yeah, I forgot I had to go tell Ryuuen our leaders name. That was the deal."

The class froze at my sarcasm, before everyone reacted in some way. Most of the boys began to yell at me, cursing my name. About half of the girls did so too, led by Karuizawa and Shinohara. The rest of the girls, plus Hirata and a few other boys who had guessed I was joking just sighed, resigning themselves

"Everyone calm down, he was just joking, weren't you Kiyotaka-kun?" Leave it to Kikyou to be the voice of reason.

"None of you are any fun."

"Don't joke about stuff like that, moron."

"How are we supposed to get any points if you betray us!"

Ike and Yamauchi had become the self-appointed leaders of the anti-Ayanokouji group apparently, with a majority of the class backing them.

"In any case, I'm still going to the beach." When the crowd of defectives began to yell again, I continued on. "I wouldn't want to make Ryuuen angry, right?"

The class quieted down at the mention of Ryuuen. Despite how suspicious they were of me for being singled out, everyone had an idea at least of how scary Ryuuen could be, and none of them wanted to be on his bad side.

"I'll go with you, Kiyotaka-kun. If I'm there, he can't betray us, right? So everything's fine!"

I could always rely on Kikyou to diffuse a situation like this. Not only did she find the calming middle ground, but she also found an excuse to come along with me, which gave us a chance to talk in private.

"Fine. But don't even think of trying anything, Ayanokouji!"

Both of us ignored Ike's warning as we headed off towards the beach where Class C had set up camp. Whether it was a warning not to betray the class or to not try anything with Kikyou I wasn't sure, nor did I care.

As soon as we were out of range of the campsite, Kikyou's façade

dropped and she instantly became grouchy.

"I don't know how much more of this I can take. If I have to lie in that tent and listen to girls whisper about their crushes for one more night, I'm going to lose it."

"Isn't that normal for teenage girls?"

"Yes, but it doesn't mean I have to like it though."

It seemed sleeping in a hammock had even more benefits than I had realised.

"I could always break your leg and give you an excuse to retire." It was an option. Kikyou couldn't voluntarily retire without earning the ire of the class, but if she broke her leg, it would garner a lot of sympathy.

"I hope you understand just how fucking annoying all this is that I'm actually considering that."

I sighed, before reaching over to give her some head pats. I had read in a psychology book that this was a good method to calm down close female relations, and it seemed the book had not failed me yet. Kikyou quieted down, and moved closer to me as we walked, while I continued patting her head.

"If someone saw us, it'd be trouble."

"No one's around, and you seem to need it."

Kikyou sighed, relaxing into my palm slightly, the stress of the past 24 hours draining out of her frame.

"You are going to win right? I don't want to put all this effort in just to not get more points."

"Don't worry, you're doing great. Just keep it up and leave the rest to me."

This was classic psychological reasoning. Compliment their actions in a time of need, before taking away the responsibility that made them stressed. It would draw them into you, making them much more reliant on you in the future. You would be seen as somewhat of a saviour, as long as you delivered on what you promised.

"You aren't actually going to give out our leaders name though, right? You were joking."

"Actually, there's a very real chance I might. If I can turn it to our benefit, I have no problem giving up Horikita as the leader."

"But... ugh, its worthless trying to understand you. Do what you want, I'll be here to help."

"I knew I could count on you."

"Yeah, yeah. Where would you be without me?"

"Probably sitting alone in my hammock."

"Ha! Imagine it, you wouldn't have any friends at all."

The saddest part was, Kikyou probably wasn't wrong.

Our banter continued on for a short while, before we stepped out of the jungle onto the beach. We stopped as we looked out over the scene before us. It was a sight to behold.

"No way... All this stuff... Is it even possible?"

Even beholding the very real spectacle, Kikyou kept repeating the word "impossible." I felt the same. They had installed temporary toilets and shower rooms. But they also had a tarp to protect against sunlight, a barbecue, chairs, and a parasol. They had snacks and drinks. Everything required for a good, relaxing time was here. We smelled the smoke of cooking meat, and heard laughter. Jet skis whizzed past the shoreline. Students were enjoying themselves in the ocean, screaming with joy. Based on a rough calculation, they'd likely spent almost exactly 100 points.

"What in the world is Class C doing? Do they not plan to save points?"

This was an interesting strategy. Oh, so that's what Ryuuen was planning. Ingenious.

"Let's check things out. I wonder what Class C is thinking?"

We came out from the bushes and walked to the beach. One of the male students noticed us, and called out to another male student nearby. We couldn't see his face too well, since he was leaning over in his chair. One of the boys rushed over to us.

"Um, Ryuuen-san has requested your presence," he said. Judging from the timidity of his voice, he was either frightened or naturally listless.

"He rules his classmates like a king. It's like a royal welcome. What should we do?"

"You could be jealous about it?"

"Shut up, if I wanted it, I could make Class D act the same."

"Sure you could."

With a big smile on her face, and my usual blank expression, Kikyou and I made our way through the Class C campsite. As we moved, she interacted with everyone we went past, knowing everyone's names and having a quick exchange of greetings. This was the first time I had seen Kikyou properly interact with another class, and the results were impeccable. Despite being enemies, everyone loved her, or at least wanted to say hello.

Eventually we made our way to the beach chair throne and approached the man in charge of this hedonistic paradise.

"If it isn't Ayanokouji. To think someone as impressive as you would grace me with your presence. Although, I'm not sure I share your sense of fashion."

Ryuuen gave my hammock wrapped around my body a critical

look. Kikyou sighed at his comment.

"People keep trying to steal his hammock."

"It's my hammock. They can't have it. Apparently that's hard to understand."

"Of course, that's your reason." Ryuuen seemed rather amused at my actions. "You really are different, aren't you Ayanokouji. I'm so glad you came to see me."

"You were the one who called me."

Ryuuen, tanned and clad in his swimwear, laid back in his chair. He flashed his white teeth at us. On the table next to him was a water bottle and a radio, probably the one he was going to use to communicate with Ibuki. An idiotic mistake, one I'm sure he wouldn't be so casual as to perform again.

"Yeah, I was. To be honest I knew you were smart when we first met, and that deal we made just sealed my opinion. But I didn't expect to find someone else like me at this school."

"Someone like me?"

If he thought we were similar, he was sorely mistaken.

"Someone ruthless, someone who didn't mind making sacrifices. Sure, it pissed me off that you interfered with my little game with Sudou, but none of that matters." He leaned forward from his seat, his shark-like eyes staring directly into mine. "To think there's someone as interesting as you around. I can't wait to play with you in the future."

"You had better be worth my time then. Unfortunately, I'm not impressed so far."

"Oh? You think you can figure out my plan? You might be ruthless, but that doesn't mean you can match me in strategy."

Ryuuen leaned back again, smiling in the knowledge that his reasoning and plans were beyond unravelling, even by me.

"What do you think then, Kikyou? You think Ryuuen will win with this strategy?"

I drew the attention onto the woman with me, someone Ryuuen had ignored so far. Apparently, I was far more interesting to him than she was.

"Oh, Kikyou's here too. The bitch following her master around I see."

Kikyou ignored the insult, in favour for looking around, probably realising this was another test of mine.

"You seem to be having a pretty good time."

"Just as you see. We're enjoying our summer vacation."

He spread his arms wide, proudly showing off the extravaganza.

"This is a test. Do you understand what that means? You don't seem to understand the rules..."

Ryuuen didn't seem happy being told about his apparent ineptitude. Actually, he looked disappointed. "I'm shocked. Does that mean you're offering help even to an enemy like me?"

"How many points did you use? To be able to enjoy this level of entertainment, I mean."

"Hmm. Well, I didn't make a precise calculation," Ryuuen responded guilelessly. "Tch. Already getting warm. Hey, Ishizaki. Bring me some cold water, right away."

Ryuuen poured out his remaining water on the sand, almost in provocation. Ishizaki, who'd been playing volleyball nearly, panicked and rushed to get Ryuuen another water. A mountain of cardboard boxes were piled up inside the tent, likely filled with food and water.

"As you can see, we're enjoying our summer vacation. We're not your enemies. Do you understand?"

Kikyou, finding his behaviour incomprehensible, pressed her fingers against her forehead and wrinkled her brows as if she had a headache.

"You want to try surviving on this deserted island in this shitty heat? Don't joke. Class D, the lowest of all, has to put up with starvation, heat, and futility just to save a measly 100 or 200 class points. It makes me laugh. To think you're all so far behind the rest of us, that every other class can just take a break and laugh as you scramble to get any points."

Ishizaki ran over, dripping with sweat as he brought the water. He handed a cold bottle of water to Ryuuen. However, Ryuuen threw it back at Ishizaki.

"I said to bring me cold water. This water's warm."

"I... B-but..."

"Hmm?"

Ryuuen's pupils were just like those of a snake. Ishizaki's body stiffened. He picked up the bottle and ran back toward the tent.

"I don't understand, Kiyotaka-kun, but I'm sure you do. Can you make sense of this?"

"Ha, you have a lot of faith in this emotionless bastard."

"It's pretty straightforward. Ryuuen's going to give us the name of the leader for Class C."

Ryuuen froze for a moment at my declaration before he burst out laughing.

"Kukuku, you really are amazing Ayanokouji. To think I'll just tell you who they are. Didn't you notice, I'm not bothering at all with the exam."

"No, you're not. I can tell you don't even care. All of your points have been spent, haven't they."

Ryuuen grinned.

"Yeah, so what? We're enjoying our holiday, like I said."

"I took a quick flip through the rule book. The stuff you have here only covers about 100 points. And I never said it was you who spent them, did I? You gave them to another class."

Ryuuen was still smiling, but his face had grown strained at my accusations. It seemed I had hit the nail on the head. There was some guesswork in what I had said, but it filled in the gaps in my theory about his plan, and taking a gamble was not always a bad choice.

"Wait, why would he do that? And how could you know it, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Don't you remember our kind-hearted guest? One of your classmates, Ibuki, has been staying with us, Ryuuen."

"Yeah. She's a member of our class. She ran out of here rather suddenly. She went looking for help from another class in the end? Pathetic girl."

Ryuuen snorted in disgust, then laid back in his chair.

"There are helpless idiots in this world. A ruler doesn't need subordinates who disobey orders. We determined that I would use our class points to my liking. That's the fact of the matter. Besides, it's pointless to raise the banner of revolution against the ruling class."

"In other words, Ibuki-san clashed with you when you wanted to spend points."

"Well, you could say that. That's why she got a light punishment."

He made a gesture like slapping someone's cheek. Ryuuen had indeed hit her.

"Another boy defied me as well, so I had him driven out. I heard he didn't die, so he's probably off somewhere eating grass and insects to survive."

"I'm sure you'll be happy to hear that she retired this morning."

Ryuuen shot up in his chair, all traces of his previous sadistic glee gone from his face.

"What did you say?!" It was as if he couldn't believe it.

"Unfortunately, she tripped and was hit several times in the head by some trees. Naturally, I took her back to the boat to retire."

"You—

"She also left behind this nice waterproof bag. Remind me, what was inside it, Kikyou?"

"A walkie-talkie and a camera."

"That's right. This walkie-talkie wouldn't be paired to that one sitting beside you, would it?" I gestured to the walkie-talkie on the table next to Ryuuen.

Apparently, he'd had enough time to recompose himself, bringing back the façade of relaxed control, even though his plan was already in shambles.

"Kukuku, so you figured out she's a spy. It was pretty obvious anyway, I'm not surprised. You still haven't worked out my main plan yet."

"But why give her a camera? Don't you trust your classmates Ryuuen-kun?" Kikyou intervened at the perfect time, breaking up the banter from an unexpected angle of kindness.

"Of course not. I'll never trust that bitch, so of course I needed a picture."

"Don't lie Ryuuen. You needed the proof to give to Class A, along with the exam points you gave them."

There. My big gamble. I was confident I was right, but I didn't have any evidence to force the point.

Ryuuen looked at me as if I was the greatest thing since chocolate.

"Kukukuku to think I underestimated you this much Ayanokouji! You really are a beast, aren't you?! I'm utterly cornered now; you've got my balls in a vice. Incredible! To think there's someone in this school as formidable as you, now I can't wait at all to face off against you properly!"

Not a hint of fear, frustration or any kind of negative emotion showed in Ryuuen. I didn't think he was acting either. Ryuuen had my genuine respect, to be in such a poor position and still hold himself up.

"I assume you offered Katsuragi about 200 points and the leaders of Class B and D, in return for private points. There's nothing else of value at this school. You still come out of this exam with two leaders, while no one guesses that you're the leader. Your classmates are satisfied with a relaxing vacation, and you receive a constant influx of private points from Class A. I must admit it's a good strategy."

"Wait, so Ryuuen actually did give up on the exam?"

"You think I'd lie to you Kikyou? I'm hurt, kukuku."

"In a sense, he has. But the strategy he has would probably have let him come out on top."

"But it's all fallen to shit now, thanks to you, fucking monster."

Despite his complete collapse, Ryuuen was still looking just as calm as ever. Possibly because he still got to have a relaxing vacation. I doubted that was the case. There was something special about the way he thought.

"Not necessarily."

"Wait, Kiyotaka-kun, when you said you'd betray us, that was a

joke, right?"

"Kukuku haven't you realised yet, Kikyou? Ayanokouji works for himself, and no one else. Just be lucky he's helping your class at all."

"I have a proposal, Ryuuen. Class D's leader for Class C's." This is what I had asked for right back at the beginning of our conversation, the destination it had been heading to since the beginning.

"Kiyotaka-kun, be serious, we need to win this exam."

"This exam is pretty dull. Don't you think this will be more interesting?"

"I-I can't believe this, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Think about it for a bit Kikyou. This is actually your best choice." It seemed Ryuuen had realised what I was doing.

"Eh?"

"Ryuuen will probably figure out our leader anyway. At least now we get something back. I'll give you the leader card on the last night, you can give it to Katsuragi, and give me the leader for Class B. Everyone wins except Kanzaki."

"Kukuku to think you're willing to drag your class down just to keep some control."

"It's just a coincidence that it helps the class. This is just a more fun ending to this exam."

Ryuuen closed his eyes, probably weighing up the pros and cons. Kikyou had been putting on a perfect act. I had told her earlier I might have to give up our leader, but in order to not give away her true nature, she had to be loyal to the class and question my betrayal.

"Don't worry, Kikyou. Our class was doomed from the start. At least this way we get some points."

"I understand, it's just... this is such a sneaky thing to do."

"Alright Ayanokouji. I'll make a deal with you, if you tell me the name of your leader now."

"In that case, I want 50,000 points a month." Ryuuen cracked an eyelid at that.

"Trying to change the deal?"

"I'm selling out 50 class points. It seems fair to me." Ryuuen smirked at my reasoning.

"Done. The name?"

"Horikita."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, probably trying to remember who that was, before he burst out laughing once more.

"Kukukuku, that bitch? I never would have guessed her, that's actually a really good choice. To think Class D could actually make

a decision like that."

"I'll also throw in a free name. The leader of Class A is Totsuka Yahiko."

Ryuuen narrowed his eyes as he stared directly at me, probably trying to figure out if I was lying.

"I'll double check that, but if it's true, then I thank your kindness. We'll seal the deal with a contract back on the boat."

"Sure. Back out of it and I'll target you specifically. What happened to Komiya will be nothing compared to your fate." I showed him a little darkness in my eyes. It would do no good to have Ryuuen back out and try to betray me, after having secured a nice little nest egg of points for myself.

He took my gaze head on without flinching, however. That was unexpected. It was as if he didn't feel fear. Ryuuen had my mounting respect after this conversation. I would have to be even more wary of him than I had been so far. He was a ruthless tyrant, as well as a sharp strategist. Compared to Class A and C, Class B really were looking worthless.

Speaking of Class B...

"You wouldn't happen to know where Class B is hiding, would you?"

"They're not far from you, just a little to the west. Off to visit them on a little date with Kikyou?"

"Something like that."

We turned to leave the campsite, but Ryuuen called out one last time to us as we walked away.

"Nice doing business with you, monster."

Yes, Ryuuen. Thank you for playing my little game. Now you've sealed your defeat.

Authors Notes:

Holy fuck I'm proud of this chapter. Literally sat down and wrote it in one sitting without distractions, which is actually a very rare occurrence. I really got into it as i wrote, and it just felt right as it appeared on the screen.

One of the things I hadn't realised was a part of being an author was being able to explore questions you hadn't even considered. Point and case Ryuuens plan. It's actually genius. Despite how he lost with zero points, he still gets a huge advantage. Literally the only way it could have gone better was if Ayanokouji had named Class B's leader, but that's a moot point. I didn't even realise this, but as I wrote it just sort of happened to become obvious just how clever Ryuuen was.

Still a little uncomfortable about writing fight scenes, so as you

may have noticed I've been trying to keep them as short as possible. It's such a different thing to write, as opposed to machiavelian plans, and I'm still figuring it out for the moment, so particular feedback on that would be appreciated.

Ryuuen is fun. I struggled a lot writing a SS for him in Arc 2 but after working with his part in this arc and rereading the light novel I think I'm getting the hang of him. He's not the sort of person to back down, and I think that's the main way to fight against Ayanokouji. If he can't beat you straight up, if he can't completely destroy his opponents then he's vunerable. Idk just an idea I'm working with.

I don't ever interact with comments, but I do read them all, and it is heartwarming to hear from you. Just wanted to address Yahiko's name because it's been mentioned a few times so far. Yes, his name is Totsuka, but most people don't recognise that. Yahiko is someone everyone knows, so it's an easy name to use, plus Ayanokouji refers to him that way in the light novels, so I'm sticking with canon. No disrespect, I love the comments, it's always amazing to read what people think, just don't want people to worry about his name.

Uni work went well, only got one assignment left so updates should still stay on track. I still have one more chapter pre-written so its all good until Friday then my backs against the wall. Writing under pressure will be a new experience. Kinda excited.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 6 - Setting the Stage

Kikyou and I made our way back towards the jungle and away from Class C's beach resort. Obviously, she had some questions, but was smart enough to wait until we were in the safety of the jungle to ask them.

We were heading to see how Class B was holding up. Out of all the classes so far, they were at the biggest disadvantage. There was a deal, a plan and strategy between Classes A, C and D, all three of us getting something out of targeting Class B.

And that just wouldn't do.

"What just happened back there? How'd you know what Ryuuen was planning?"

I'd thought it was pretty obvious what Ryuuen was planning, and I'd explained most of it to him to prove I'd seen through it. Apparently Kikyou wasn't capable of connecting the rest of the dots together.

"It's like I said, Ryuuen doesn't care about the exam. He's focusing on the future. Since there's no negatives that can come from this, his strategy is focusing on securing a stable position for his class, while still gaining small advantages, rather than gambling everything on each exam as they come."

"And so, he gave Katsuragi some S-points, in exchange for private points every month. But how'd you know he'd deal with Class A, and want private points?"

We were walking rather slowly, ambling through the jungle while we talked. The Class B camp wasn't far away, and I wanted this conversation to be over before we got there. It wouldn't do for soeone out looking for food to see us before we reached the campsite with the element of surprise. If it was possible we could see who was the leader, though I figured that was unlikely.

"Ryuuen had to barter with someone. It obviously wasn't our class, and the only person in Class B willing to take a calculated risk like that would be Kanzaki, and he's much to suspicious of Ryuuen to be willing to take the deal. The only option left is Class A."

"That doesn't explain how you knew it would be for private points."

"What else is there?" Kikyou silenced and thought for a bit at that.

"There's nothing else of value to barter with, especially if you're trading potential class points with S-points. No, Ryuuen really came out on top with this deal."

"So, what, Ryuuen will get a bunch of points?"

"Ryuuen gave them 200 or so S-points. That's technically the equivalent of 20,000 private points per person if Class A can save them, so Class A will be paying him back 20,000 points per person for the rest of school. A deal which immensely favours Ryuuen, and hamstrings Class A severely."

"Wait, that's actually a terrible deal! Why would Katsuragi take it?"

I could hear some faint voices up ahead, so I stopped where we were, inside a small grove. Class B wasn't far away, and there was no reason to rush. I doubted our campsite would catch fire even if Kikyou left for a couple of hours.

"I don't think he really has a choice. Katsuragi is basically already finished as class leader. He needs to win this exam by a huge margin, no matter the future consequences, or he's never going to get another chance. And if he loses, the deal will still hurt Sakayanagi. Katsuragi isn't gambling much himself."

Kikyou was staring at me with wide eyes as we unravelled the last of Ryuuen's plan. It seemed she finally understood how strong of a position Ryuuen had been in before we interrupted, and how little chance we had had of winning.

Katsuragi too, had made a bold gamble on his final chance of being leader, going all or nothing with this opportunity to win. It would never have worked though, even if I hadn't interfered. Ryuuen's plan was too good, and someone from Class A would have betrayed.

I was incredibly impressed with Ryuuen in this exam. Coming up with such a plan in the first few hours was no mean feat. Despite the difference in their raw intelligence, I would have to put Ryuuen on the same pedestal as Sakayanagi. Both would be fearsome opponents to face, and I couldn't wait to challenge them both at once.

"Is that why you asked for 50,000 points a month? To attack Ryuuen a little?"

It was an astute observation. I was surprised Kikyou had noticed that little exchange in the midst of our bartering earlier with Ryuuen.

"Partially, but really I just wanted some security. 50,000 won't hurt Class C at all, it's about 1300 per student, and if Ryuuen is collecting all their points every month it won't harm him at all. No, I just wanted some points for us to have."

"Wait, us?" Kikyou seemed surprised that I included her in this.

"Of course, you get half of them. You don't think I'd leave my partner out, would I? We're in this together."

This was just one more thing tying her to me. If she ever tried to betray me, she'd also be losing a steady supply of points. The cons of any betrayal, if she was even still entertaining such thoughts, were far beyond any benefits.

"Oh... well, thanks, I guess. Partners, huh..." She whispered something under her breath, but I couldn't tell what it was due to her posture. Her head was downcast, and her whole body was acting reserved, shy even. It was an unexpected side I'd never seen from her before. I didn't know what to make of it, or if calling her my partner really had such an impact on her.

"Let's get going. I want to see how Class B is doing. It's no fun if they're left out of the know."

"Hmm, I suppose they're probably gonna lose now, right? Since every other class has teamed up against them. Sucks to be them, fucking united-in-kindness bastards."

We turned at the roots of a big broken tree and ended up on a path with a lot of tracks on it. Clearly a large number of students had come this way, and it made it much easier to walk along. So far, of all the ordeals on this island, the blood-sucking mosquitoes that went for our arms and legs were the most irritating. Soon, we arrived at Class B's base camp.

"It's exactly as I expected. Class B is doing fabulously well with the wrong part of the exam."

Their way of living was entirely different from ours. Their class had made practical use of their spot, with many trees surrounding a well. They didn't have enough space to spread out three or four tents, so they'd made good use of the space by putting up hammocks. Despite starting in much the same way, our class had chosen completely different items. I was rather curious about some unfamiliar equipment near the well, but what surprised me the most was the atmosphere.

"Huh? Kushida-san? And Ayanokouji-kun?"

Someone called to us, almost as if she'd sensed the arrival of sudden visitors. Ichinose was trying to tie a string around a tree to put up a hammock. She wore a jersey, which really suited her, and appeared lively. Kanzaki sat a little further away from her.

"Your class seems to be functioning well, despite obstacles."

"Ha ha, yeah. It was really difficult at first! But we tried a bunch of different things, and it worked out. Though the list of chores just keeps on increasing. There's still a ton of work left," said Ichinose with a big smile.

Unfortunately, we'd been spotted as soon as we had arrived, with no real chance to identify the leader. That didn't mean we couldn't tease them a bit.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, is that a—"

"Please, Ichinose-san, don't mention the hammock. Just let him wear it."

No. We were not discussing my hammock again. Ichinose clearly has her own, so there's no reason for her to want mine. Right? No, instead I'll just give her a little paranoia.

"It's a shame that despite how organised you are, you're still going to lose."

Ichinose's face fell a little at my antagonistic attitude.

"There's no need for that, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm sure all the classes can get along separately."

"By that you mean you aren't going to vote for leaders?" Kikyou asked the all-important question.

"Yep! We don't want to go against the other classes, so we're going to keep to ourselves and get through the week as best we can."

"Ryuuen has given up the exam, as I'm sure you've heard." Ichinose nodded her confirmation, and I continued. "Katsuragi has probably curled up in his cave, giving nothing away. If you don't take a stand, then Class D will win it all. Kindness won't win you any favours, Ichinose, not when the only thing that matters is winning."

It was a rude awakening she would receive from this exam. So far, the only person she was wary of in school is me, from my involvement with the Sakura incident. Even so, she still wanted to get along with me. But after this exam, with consequences that would impact everyday life, she would be forced to recognise just how much people were willing to fight, and how little they cared for being kind when it mattered, even her own class.

"That's a rather cold attitude Ayanokouji-kun. I don't see why we can't just get along."

"As much as I'd like that Ichinose-san, I don't see how it's possible. The school wants us to compete, and so do most of the people in our grade. It upsets me, but everyone wants to fight for Class A, even the people in Class B."

"That's very true Kikyou, but you're missing the point. More than anyone, Ichinose wants to get to Class A, yet she only wants to do so in a manner that works with her morals. That's why she's going to lose, because she won't be capable of stopping people like Ryuuen, Sakayanagi and I, people who don't care about such insignificant things like feelings. It you aren't prepared to risk it all

to win, then you never will."

Ichinose narrowed her eyes at me, as I stabbed through the façade of kindness and caring she had up. True, she wanted everyone to get along, but at the same time she wanted to reach Class A. It was the same contradiction she'd been dealing with a month ago, and it would continually trap and hinder her ability to ever win unless she broke free of it.

"You seem confident you can win, Ayanokouji. However, don't underestimate Class B just because of our attitude. We are still superior students to most of Class D, and that's an advantage that will be hard to make up for."

Kanzaki had joined into the conversation and hit the nail on the head. Class B was objectively better than Class D. There was only one way around that.

"Then the leaders will have to make up the difference. Are you capable of matching up to me, Kanzaki?"

"I'm confident in my own abilities, as much as I am cautious of yours." A good answer.

"Well, I've figured out their leader now. Let's go Kikyou." Time to bluff and scare them off.

"Eh? Already? I thought it would take at least another five minutes to figure out."

"No, the patterns Class B walks are too predictable, it's easy to see from their interactions where the important people are. And knowing that Ichinose is co-leader with Kanzaki for this exam narrowed it down to one person. We win. You lose."

I turned to leave the campsite, while Kikyou remained facing them for a moment, probably trying to fix the damage in her relationship with Ichinose and Kanzaki.

"W-wait, Ayanokouji-kun! You didn't actually figure out our leader, did you?"

I turned back to face them.

"Can you be sure of that? I could be bluffing, true, so how about a deal. I'll give you Class D's leader for Class B's. If I have already figured it out, you've got nothing to lose."

"But didn't Ichinose-san say they weren't putting down leaders, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"That's right, she did. I guess the deals off then." I noticed Kanzaki's face tighten at Kikyou's question. So, he wanted to name opposing class leaders, but got outvoted. That was my opportunity in this class. My objective of this conversation was now achieved.

"At least tell us who you think it is. If we can hide them better, then Class A and C won't know. You don't want them to get more points, do you?" It was a good argument from Ichinose, and I was

planning on saying the name anyway.

"Fine. Your leader is Andou Sayo."

Both Ichinose's and Kanzaki's faces fell at my words.

"So, you really did figure it out then."

"Heh, I'm impressed Ayanokouji-kun. As upsetting as it is, I can't deny you're incredible for working it out just by watching our class for a few minutes." Ichinose was laying it on thick. Apparently, she thought that by flattering me, it would distract me from the fact that my guess was wrong.

Unfortunately for her, flattery doesn't work on me.

"Here's a lesson Kikyou. Ichinose made a mistake by trying to flatter me. If she'd just accepted it, well I probably still would have seen through their poor acting, but most people would have believed their despair. Ichinose tried too hard to convince me I was right."

"Wait, what are you talking about Kiyotaka-kun? Is the leader not Andou-san?"

"Thanks to Ichinose's mistake I've now confirmed that Andou isn't the leader. That brings the possible candidates down from 27 to 13 people by excluding similarities between her and other leaders. The relief in Kanzaki's eyes wasn't just from me getting the wrong person, but from getting distracted by the wrong type of person for leader. Their leader isn't someone who could ever take a leadership role, hence the 13 people it could be. I'll soon have that narrowed down to one."

Ichinose and Kanzaki stared at me in stunned silence. Of course, everything I had just said was garbage, but to people on the back foot in our dealings it was a terrifying thing to witness. The most important thing of this exam had almost been blundered. I wasn't lying about the sort of person they chose to be leader, but I had no intention of narrowing it down any further. That was Ryuuen and Kaneda's, who I'd seen around the campsite, job.

I turned and moved away from the two leaders of Class B, leaving them speechless for Kikyou to deal with. It would be best to leave her to work and not influence their opinion of her. It wouldn't do for class leaders to be suspicious of her true nature, and while their classmates would never be convinced to target Kikyou, there was a lot of damage a class leader could secretly do to target an individual without people finding out.

"I'm sorry about Kiyotaka-kun. He was really rude, so I hope you forgive him. It's my job to make sure he acts nicer to people." Smart, Kikyou. Giving a reason to attach yourself to me in situations where you can let me talk unhindered.

"It's... ok. Sorry, I just wasn't expecting anything like that."

"He's just trying to win the exam, Ichinose-san. There's nothing we can do about Ayanokouji, how he acts is up to him. Good luck controlling him, Kushida-san."

"Thanks! Good luck for the next week, I'll try and come by again to catch up!"

"Bye, Kushida-san!" Ichinose had regained some of her usual cheer as soon as she had to speak loudly enough for the class to hear her. A good actor, even if it was genuine.

I had kept moving, albeit slower than usual, and had been listening to Kikyou's conversation from behind me. It seemed she had patched things up rather nicely, and quickly ran to catch up to me.

Once we were far enough away from Class B, a savage grin appeared on Kikyou's face.

"That was amazing. I've never seen Ichinose looking sad before, you destroyed the bitch! Ha, that's what you get for trying to take my spot! I'm the cutest, most loved girl in the year, not you, you fucking whore!"

It seemed Kikyou had a lot of pent-up anger when it came to Ichinose, which made sense since the existence of Ichinose was counterproductive to Kikyou's reason for existence.

"Class B is going to have a terrible week. I wouldn't be overly surprised if Ichinose or Kanzaki has a breakdown by the end of it."

Kikyou's celebration stopped for a moment, obviously not expecting something so extreme.

"Wow, you're really going all out against them. What're you gonna do to break them so much?"

"In one word? Nothing."

"Huh? But if you do nothing, won't they... oh. Oh, ahahahah! That's horrible!"

Yes, she'd figured it out. The ever-evil Kikyou was taking great pleasure at knowing the mental state of Class B, specifically their leaders, by the end of the week.

"I made it very clear that I was trying to figure out their leader, and with only a few minutes of observation I'd narrowed it down to 13 people. Now, they're gonna be on the lookout for me constantly, wondering when or if I'd spy or interrogate their classmates."

"And when you do nothing for a week..."

"They'll never be able to rest or relax in fear of my actions. The thought of me spying on them will drive their paranoia to skyrocket. As a side effect, they'll probably stop watching Kanade as closely now, since they only suspect me, when he's actually my method of finding their leader, via Ryuuen."

By announcing my intention to spy on them, already holding an

advantage in knowledge, and then doing nothing, Kanzaki and Ichinose could never relax or allow their class to become lax in their actions. By the end of the week, they'd probably be jumping at shadows, especially after I executed the second part of my plan.

"How do you think like that? Everything just fits when you say it, it's so... ugh, I can't understand you."

"I'll tell you this now, Kikyou, so don't ask things like that again. I'll put up with a lot, but don't pry into my life. You won't get any answers, and I won't take kindly to probing. This is one thing I won't ever budge on."

I gave her a firm warning about this. There was no need to try and scare her into accepting that, since Kikyou could probably tell when I was being completely serious and when I was willing to change what was happening, like with my stance on Horikita.

It had to be said though. Kikyou's nature was to fish for information, and I could see her constantly needling me for information, even if she didn't intend to. A conscious warning was necessary to avoid any annoyances.

"Uh, fine I suppose. Can't blame me for being curious though, right?" She gave me her cutest smile, trying to get out of trouble. It did almost nothing for an emotionless monster like me.

"We're almost at Class A's spot, so get yourself together. We're here to meet some people in particular."

Kushida grumbled a little about changing the topic, but she pulled her mask back on, cute smile across her face, eyes sparkling for everyone to see. The instantaneous change was as disturbing as ever.

We saw the cave opening that looked like it cut deep into the mountainside, like a demon's mouth. There were two temporary toilets and one shower room near the entrance.

"I can't really see the inside from here..."

"They've covered the entrance with tarp from the toilet. It's a smart idea, but I bet it gets very hot in that cave at night now. So many bodies insulated through vinyl."

Kikyou shuddered at the thought.

"God, I'd hate to sleep in there. I'd probably just buy a hammock and stay outside."

"They can't do that. The keypad is inside, so everyone not in there when it expires, as in anyone sleeping outside, is one less person who could be the leader. The entire class has to sleep in the cave."

Kikyou was looking more and more horrified by the second. We approached the cave, but I turned us away and moved across the clearing upon seeing some people. There weren't many people outside, and we were only noticed by the two I was trying to talk

to.

"Yo, Ayanokouji! I was wondering when you'd turn up."

"Ugh. Seriously, we've been waiting her for you for hours."

Hashimoto and Kamuro were sitting outside not too far from the cave. Obviously one of them had figured I'd try and make contact as early as possible and had waited in a position where I could talk to them without being seen. It was to be expected that Sakayanagi's hand selected pawns were intelligent in their own right.

"Kiyotaka-kun, why are we meeting with these two? Don't you want to talk to Katsuragi-kun?"

"Ah, its Kushida too! I'm surprised to see you here, but I guess if the boss brought you along then he trusts you." Hashimoto was a very personable person, but underneath that exterior there was an intelligent viper. It had taken him no less than three days to supposedly betray his class for me to get the best chance of winning.

"Don't remind me, idiot. I still can't believe that creep just sold us off to Ayanokouji."

"Eh? Kiyotaka-kun, what's she talking about? You didn't buy her did you?!" Kikyou's outrage seemed more real than I had expected. Perhaps she was worried about being replaced, not realising that to me she was irreplicable.

"Haha, that's just Kamuro making jokes. We're on loan to Ayanokouji for this exam from Sakayanagi."

"And I'm eternally grateful for her help. Or I would be if she wasn't trying to get me to crush Katsuragi."

"Tch, you and that flat bitch are crazy. To think you worked it out already."

"Isn't that why you're on loan though? I don't follow." Kikyou, who had no inside information was understandably confused.

"They're not actually on loan. I assume Sakayanagi asked them only to help me if it directly hurt Katsuragi. She's not just going to give me an in with her class, and only help me in a way that helps her." Kikyou looked like she understood after my explanation.

"Now that that's all cleared up, what do you need from us boss?" Hashimoto was particularly quick to ask for orders, seeming very keen to serve.

"Nothing yet. I've got a plan, but I'll tell you when I need you to do something." Hashimoto grinned.

"Playing it close to the chest, it see. Fair enough. The princess has high expectations for you, so you better not let her down. We're reporting everything that happens to her."

"I'd expect nothing less. I did want to check one thing, though. Is Machida your leader?"

Kamuro stiffened, straightening up as I said that. Obviously, she wasn't expecting me to guess their leader on the second day, nor guess the wrong name. This was a test to see whether I could trust them or not, if they were on my side.

Hashimoto on the other hand, laughed at my question.

"Not at all, you guessed completely wrong. I was expecting more from someone who got such high praise from the princess." He narrowed his eyes at me. "Unless you already know who it is."

"I caught Yahiko with the keycard yesterday, and he and Katsuragi all but admitted he's the leader. Now I'm convinced you're on my side."

Hashimoto couldn't help himself from laughing at this. He seemed to be unable to speak, seeing his class crushed so easily, and without any of the inside help he was offering.

"How... you and Sakayanagi, both of you are nuts. God, at least this means you don't need our help." Kamuro was looking on the positive side for her, choosing to ignore the massive disparity between Sakayanagi and myself, and the rest of the year.

"Don't worry, for what I've got planned I'll only need Hashimoto's help. I'll be in contact early in the last morning. Make sure you're awake then, Hashimoto."

He managed to pull himself back together enough to respond.

"It seemed I really backed the right horse, ahaha. Don't worry boss, I'll be there for whatever you need." If he was trying to get into my good books by being cooperative, it was working. I still hadn't forgotten how quickly he betrayed Sakayanagi after seeing my post about the S-system, so trusting this man was never possible. Expecting him to act in his own best interests, however, was entirely predictable.

"I don't understand, why are you betraying your class? Don't you want to win?" Kikyou had remained quiet once again. During our conversations with other class leaders, she seemed to follow my lead and keep quiet, letting me control the conversations. At the same time, she had an uncanny knack to ask just the right question at the perfect time to ilicit the reaction I wanted. When it came to manipulating conversations, Kikyou was impeccable.

"The loli told us to work with Ayanokouji. She doesn't care about the class; all she wants is for Katsuragi to lose."

"And for that she'd sabotage her class?" Kikyou didn't seem to believe this.

"It's not strange. Class A is in a strong position, so one loss won't hurt them, but it will finish Katsuragi. Even if their betrayal is leaked, it's his fault for not controlling the class properly."

"The boss gets it. It's just as the princess said, Katsuragi's already

finished, he just doesn't know it yet."

"Also, Yahiko's really fucking annoying. It'd be really funny to see his idol get destroyed."

"You aren't wrong, Kamuro. Yahiko would probably be more affected than Katsuragi. The big baldy seems to have already given up. I guess that's because he knows you've found him out already."

A silence fell as everyone contemplated the state of the exam. From Class A's perspective, they were probably going to come last.

I had gotten everything I was intending to from here. Now my only goal was to catch up on my sleep.

"Don't do anything suspicious. Although it's a moot point, it would be frustrating if Katsuragi figured out you're betraying him."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Around three quarters of the class sides with Sakayanagi now, so they'll probably turn a blind eye to us talking. They probably want Katsuragi to fail just as much as the princess does."

"Alright, time to go Kikyou. Let's make sure the camp hasn't burnt down yet."

"Ok, Kiyotaka-kun. It was nice talking again Hashimoto-kun, Kamuro-san!"

"I've told you before, leave me alone. I've got enough on my plate with the loli, I don't need friendship too." Kikyou's face fell a little at Kamuro's icy reply but didn't let it deter her.

"I'll see you in five days, Hashimoto."

"Don't worry, I'll be here."

Nothing more needed to be said. Kikyou and I made our way back to the river campsite in silence this time. Not that there were unresolved questions, or a tension between us. No, we simply walked back together in a comfortable quiet, content with how it was.

I was still contemplating how she had reacted when I called her my partner. Did she trust me? Was she truly on my side, was she truly my tool or did I still have to be cautious? I couldn't answer any of these questions, and my chance to contemplate them further was ruined on our return to the campsite.

Surprisingly, nothing had burnt down. That was the only positive.

Ike was yelling at Shinohara over something insignificant.

Yukimura and Karuizawa were having a shouting match about something that cost three points.

Yamauchi was very obviously hiding in a bush next to the trees I had set my hammock up on previously, and at the same time ogling half the girls in the class.

Most of the corn was still uneaten, surprisingly, and it seemed no one had spent any more points. The boys and girls were completely

separate, except for Hirata who sat under a tree in silence.

Some people had gone for a swim, while others yelled at them for swimming in unsafe water.

Kikyou just sighed. I felt for her, I really did. This would be a horrible experience for her to go through, but I had no doubts in her ability to manage it.

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

"You're going to need it."

"Is it too late for you to break my leg?"

I'm not surprised she was still considering that.

"You've got this. If there's anything you're good at, it's manipulating idiots."

She smirked at my statement.

"You're right. They don't stand a chance. Let's win this exam."

Authors Notes:

There we go, Class A and B also dealt with. Honestly, I feel bad for Class B but they're getting fucked so far, and it's fun to tease them.

Bit of a shorter chapter, and the next too will be as well, just a few things happening in each setting up for the big boi stuff later on.

One thing I'm going to spend some time thinking about is Class A, because so far I really haven't devoted much time to them at all. It's been a lot of focus on Class C, and there's one thing I want to address. Ryuuen didn't change his plan much for this exam from the canon. Yes, he knew about Ayanokouji, but so far he's made it pretty clear that he's just out for fun, when he gave the exam papers to everyone. He put his own class at a disadvantage, which would be enough evidence that he didn't indent to participate. Also, Ryuuen's ego also got in the way, because he certainly has one. Not as big as Nagumo, but Ryuuen is also pretty confident in his own abilities, and so far Ayanokouji hasn't directly faced him. Probably poor reasoning but thats what I'm going with.

Now main point, FUCK YOU to whoever mentioned guessing the leader as bonus points lost. You took about three years off my life, i spent half an hour scouring the wiki, reading the light novel and other peoples fics, before yeah, I'm pretty sure they're classed as bonus points, at least according to the wiki. No one else is following that though, and I've already done the maths so I wont either.

I'm not actually angry it was just a shock that kinda broke me for a second. Honestly, thanks for keeping me on my toes by pointing that stuff out. It's always helpful.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 7 - The calm before the storm

The third day began much the same as the previous had ended; in a rather calm and measured manner. It was strange to see the class, who were so often at each other's throats, not having any real arguments

Sure, the boys and girls had immediately dispersed to opposite ends of the campsite, and there were only a few people reasonable enough to cross much further than halfway, but it was a nice change from the ordinary bickering in class.

Perhaps we needed a bigger classroom. Or classes outside perhaps.

After grabbing breakfast, I made my way back to the hammock. There wasn't anything for me to do today, so I was planning on taking this opportunity to rest. I had no idea how much sleep I would get over the rest of the week, so taking a break now was as good a choice as anything.

There really wasn't anything else to do, anyway.

Enough food had been gathered yesterday to last us up to three more days if people rationed properly. If not, it was already budgeted in for purchasing food with points, meaning that for essentials, there was no need to put any effort in.

Unless something occurred within our campsite working against the class, the week would proceed as normal.

But where's the fun in that?

These thoughts were making their way through my mind when I reached my hammock, and after quickly throwing Yamauchi out of it and reclaiming my throne over the rest of the class I let my mind relax.

What was the best course of action? That was the question I was still struggling with. Despite my actions, I had intentionally left myself with a wide range of options, many possible outcomes from this exam still were available.

Could I work with Ryuuen? It was certainly an option. Neither of us would ever trust the other, especially since I approached him and forced my way into a deal with him, but together we would be able

to defeat the other classes even more completely.

That wasn't a great plan however, due to the current class standings. All the other three classes were more or less close in points to each other. Yes, by working with Ryuuen we could gain a large advantage over Class A and B, but it would also give Class C the lead. And once it came time to try and defeat Ryuuen, the other two classes would also be attacking back, leaving us at a 2v1v1, and Class D in a big disadvantage.

I could partner with Class C. Kanzaki was unlikely to trust me, but Ichinose would be willing to agree to a partnership, I suspected. It would give her a chance to work closely with me, while supporting her ideals of cooperation. She was also, despite her current standing, a very competent person. She wasn't someone to be underestimated and working with her would prove insightful to the flaws in her class.

Kanzaki would be very hesitant of working with me, but my trust could be bought. I could provide them with the leader's names and prove my 'honest' intentions to cooperate with them. It seemed likely he would agree to work with me, at least provisionally.

Class A was out of the question. There were only two people to negotiate with there, and I had a deal with one of them to crush the other. Katsuragi was not someone I had any interest in working with, due to his defensive nature, as displayed in this exam. He was far above most of the students in this grade, but his non-confrontational nature severely limited any possibilities of victory, and I had no intention of being hampered by them.

Sakayanagi would also never agree to a partnership, at least not without extenuating circumstances. She wanted nothing more than to defeat the masterpiece of the White Room, and prove the superiority of natural-born geniuses, meaning that in any chance to compete there would be no cooperation between us unless it was necessary.

There was a third option, however. Hashimoto had made it very clear he followed whoever gave him the best chance of reaching Class A. He was a careful consideration in my plans. If I had him on my side, I could form a third faction, one that could compete with Sakayanagi. But due to him already being in Class A, without any guarantee in the form of 20 million private points to move him to my class, I couldn't expect him to purposely sabotage his chances, since he was currently in such a good position.

Of course, there was always my original idea, to challenge all three classes at once. The decision to do that would end up being a balance of consequences, weighing pros and cons for the two choices.

By targeting a single class in an alliance with one or two others, Class B for example would be driven to the ground and would receive practically nothing. Losing so badly would probably throw off their unity quite a bit, putting them out of the competition at least for a while. The downside of that was the two classes I allied with would gain a larger advantage, and the gap between them and Class D would not change.

Challenging all three classes' head on however, would net a much smaller change in the difference of points. It would put every other class down, and raise us up, but it would also involve pitting the other classes against each other in some way, lest one of them gets ambitious and acts while the others don't. Thus, I would need to ensure that all three classes negate each other's points, while receiving less for Class D.

But a chance to go against three classes at once, while also pitting them against each other was too good to pass.

This was what I had planned to do after all. If I couldn't have a peaceful life, I would fight the best and brightest of Japan's future. If I could survive and win in this microcosm of society, then perhaps I would learn what I was hoping to when I came to this school.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Do you have a minute?"

Hirata had finally approached me, pulling me out of the spiral of thoughts making their way through my mind.

"What's up Hirata?"

"Do you mind coming down from your hammock? I don't want to be looking up while we talk." Hmm. It was a fair request, but I couldn't help being suspicious. It was possible this was a ploy to steal my hammock. I trusted Hirata somewhat, so I suppose this was worth the risk.

"Fine."

I clambered down the tree once more, having garnered a fair amount of practice at doing so over the past few days. Hirata sat down leaning against the base of one of the two trees, and I matched him against the other.

"So, what did you want to talk about. It's not that I'm busy, but I don't particularly feel like doing much for this week."

"You say that, but I still feel like you'll be instrumental in helping our class."

"Anything's possible."

We sat in silence for a while. I wasn't going to push him to talk, but I suspected Hirata was going to open up to me now even if I didn't. It was just a matter of time, and that was something I had in abundance.

"Was it worth saving Sudou-kun?"

"What do you mean by that?"

I had suspected the root of his problems came from the incident with Sudou. I hadn't realised he was questioning the benefit of my actions.

"Two people left the school. Sakura for suffering something no one should have to, and Komiya for doing something no normal person would ever think of."

An indirect insult, but I'll let it pass.

"What's your point? What happened, happened, there's nothing you can do about it."

"But maybe Sudou should have just taken the punishment. If he just got suspended for a few weeks, then none of that would have happened."

"That's hindsight Hirata. Looking back, it's very clear that it would have been the better alternative. But who could have thought so when he first got in trouble?"

"I know, but—

"If I recall, you were also helping us clear Sudou's name. Doesn't that make you complicit too?"

It was a brutal accusation, but logically it was correct.

"Don't you dare say that Ayanokouji-kun."

Hirata's face had darkened, anger taking over his expression.

"Why? Because you don't want to face the truth? You wanted to clear Sudou's name and find the true culprit, and that's what happened. This is the result of those actions?"

"It is, but not like that. I didn't want any of that to happen to Sakura!"

That was the loudest, most energetic he had been since the case. It seemed playing on his emotions would elicit a very strong reaction despite his withdrawal from social interaction.

"Hirata, I cleared Sudou's name, and secured the best outcome for our class. I won, so can you explain to me the problem?"

I of course had figured out his issue. I was approaching our conversation with an 'ends justify the means' perspective, something Hirata despised. From what I knew of him, he wanted to help everyone. Much like Ichinose, Hirata was on everyone's side, and wanted the best outcome in any situation for everyone involved. I was pushing the opposite belief onto his actions, in order to see how he reacted, to see how he broke when his actions went against his own world view.

"You don't care, do you? You don't care about what happened to Sakura."

"What happened was a terrible thing, Hirata. It's tragic that it

happened. But in the end, it all worked out for us, and I won. That's what matters."

He sat there shocked. Perhaps he had hoped to find a kindred spirit in me, someone who shared his grief at what happened. Perhaps he was looking for a reason that Sakura had to suffer so much. But he wouldn't find it with me.

"You're a horrible person, Ayanokouji-kun."

He whispered those words softly, before getting up and leaving me where I was sitting and heading back towards the main campsite.

It was interesting. I had heard those words quite a few times, variations of calling me a horrible human being. Perhaps it was impossible, for someone without a heart like me to function in society. From what I had observed, my true self wouldn't be accepted.

It was details like this that the White Room hadn't taught me. They never made mention of how different I was from normal people. I had observed it in books, but it was still interesting to see how far removed my opinion of the world was from what regular people thought. It was something I would have to learn to adapt to in the future. People couldn't handle a heartless monster.

Aside from that, the conversation from Hirata had revealed a lot about his attitude. He truly felt for everyone around him. It was a weakness that was easily exploitable, and I didn't know why he was that way, but it was a fact that he would try and help everybody. In any situation he would act as a mediator, taking the least problematic path.

He would rather Sudou suffer a small yet unjust punishment than have Sakura suffer something much worse. Of course, many people might believe something along the same lines, but Hirata had been broken to a shell of what he was before simply because a classmate suffered an unpreventable problem for the sake of another.

And that made his relationship with Karuizawa all the more interesting. If it was for status, as Kikyou had explained, it would make sense that he would agree. To elevate and protect someone else seemed like something Hirata would do without question, as long as there was a good reason. And now that he was useless, Karuizawa was starting to break away from him, seeming less confident in her position than before. I assumed she was doing something along the lines of looking before she jumped, testing the waters for as long as possible, before making the choice to either stick with Hirata or break away.

Perhaps that could prove useful. There was one piece missing from my control, and perhaps Karuizawa could be that pawn.

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It was late in the evening when I next had a chance to talk to Kikyou.

From what I'd seen from my hammock she'd had a more relaxing day. Most of the organisation had been completed yesterday, meaning it was only menial tasks and food that had to be organised. So, she had had the chance to spend some time playing with people, going for a swim in the river, and generally being the cutest friend to everyone.

It was fascinating to watch her work. Kikyou's mind was one of the most fascinating I had ever come across, even in some of the books on psychology I had read specifically on contradictions and psychological splits. At this point it was obvious she did not follow ordinary thinking patterns, and that just made understanding her psyche so much more interesting.

She had told me her story, about her desire for praise taking over any other need in her life, but I suspected that wasn't the complete truth. There had to be more behind it, and I was intrigued enough to study her further.

"Hey."

It was about 10pm now, and virtually everyone else was asleep. With the sun setting at 6pm and rising at 5am, everyone had been forced to adjust their sleep schedules by now, meaning everyone had turned in for the night. Even those who weren't asleep had nothing better to do than to lie in bed since we didn't have phones, meaning Kikyou and I were the only people awake.

"Why're you still up? Don't tell me you're planning to sneak off again."

I'd snuck off the previous night in order to explore the island some more. I wanted to find a secondary base camp, in case of an emergency. It always behoved one to plan ahead.

"What are you going to do if I am, miss camp leader? Order me to stay?"

"Ha. As if I could order you to do anything."

That was true enough. It was very clear to both of us who was in charge in our relationship. Thankfully, Kikyou seemed to have accepted it at this point, acquiescing the fact that she would never have any meaningful control over me. Even if she tried to get the class to turn on me, I wasn't one to care about public opinion. Her main power was worthless against me, leaving me beyond her machinations.

Not that I suspected she particularly minded any longer.

I climbed down from my hammock and took a seat, leaning against one of the two trees, with Kikyou quickly following me,

leaning slightly on my side. There was no one around, and she seemed to be seeking comfort from the one person she could potentially trust.

I still had yet to verify whether that trust was real.

"Rough day?"

"God, you can say that again. I'm already done with these idiots, it's painful to exist around them."

Although everyone was asleep, Kikyou made a conscious choice to lower her volume and limit her words. But that didn't interest me at all.

It was the meaning of her words that form the foundation of the dichotomy of Kushida Kikyou that fascinated me so.

Kushida claimed, vehemently, to hate everyone around her. It was a horrible experience she went through, day after day, forcing herself to get along with everyone. It went against her every fibre, as far as she claimed, and to some extent I believed her.

But it was strange because it was that relationship with people that she was so addicted to. I had never really seen her experience any form of pleasure or relief from interacting with the people around her, despite attaining their love and affection just as she aimed.

Everything she did was to sate her addiction, as she described it, yet it cost her so much, and I had never seen her reap the rewards of her efforts.

Of course, it was entirely possible that was happing in her mind exclusively. In fact, this was an extremely likely explanation. I was only being exposed to her darkness, the suffering she forced herself through, and was never given a chance to see how she was sustaining her addiction. Kikyou saw me as an outlet for her problems, and there was no reason, need or perhaps it simply wasn't feasible to show in any way that she was satisfying her need for love. I suspected that to be very likely.

I did suspect there was more to it.

For the moment, in this environment when the rage and suffering she was experiencing would only stack up without a chance of release however, there wouldn't be any opportunity for me to unlock the inner workings of her mind. I had my suspicions about her true nature, and whether it really was so separate from her façade was a question I was hoping to answer. But that was impossible on this island.

"You've done a great job so far. I saw you having fun with some of our classmates today, so it can't be all that bad, right?"

Kikyou sighed. "Yeah, it was good to have a break from being the leader for a while. Just playing around, having a swim with people,

is a lot easier than being in charge."

Between a situation where she had to take sides, and a situation where she was the centre of attention, it was easy to tell that today would have been much easier for Kikyou than yesterday.

"If you want some advice, I'd say give up on being the leader, if you can."

"Eh? Why's that?"

I could tell she wasn't going to like this.

"Unfortunately, the camp's probably going to collapse over the next few days. If there's any way for you to get out of being leader you should take it."

Kikyou just stared at me in disbelief. I was telling her that all the work she'd put in over the past three days was about to be undone, so her befuddlement was understandable.

"Are you going to cause problems? Why would you do that? Do you know how hard I've been working to keep the class together, and now you're just going to throw it all away!"

"Don't worry, it's all part of the plan."

She calmed down a little at my statement, realising I'm not one to do anything without a reason. But I wasn't quite out of the woods yet.

"So you're gonna pull our camp and class apart."

"Yeah."

"Is it a necessary part of the plan?"

No. Not at all. It was helpful, but I could manage everything without even doing so, and my reasoning for collapsing the fragile unity that existed was primarily completely unrelated to the exam.

"Yeah."

Kikyou sighed, giving up any fight left in her, leaning her head against my shoulder.

"Well, I guess I should thank you for the warning. But there's no way I can get out of being leader, so it's gonna be a fucking shitshow then."

"In that case, treat yourself a little and spend some points."

Kikyou didn't respond to that instantly, thinking the suggestion over before speaking again.

"There's no way I can get away with that. Besides, didn't you tell me not to spend too many points?"

"Just buy some luxuries for the girls, and don't tell the boys. They don't need to know, and I'm sure the girls would be incredibly thankful. Anyway, I'm not overly concerned about our initial points anymore. Just don't go overboard with your spending. As long as there's some left, it's fine."

I could feel a small smile forming on the head leaning against me.

"Finally. I was really getting fed up with this stupid lifestyle we have going."

"Well, you've earned it at this point. Consider it my thanks for a job well done."

She chuckled lightly at that, before it was quickly overtaken by a yawn. Kikyou was probably exhausted from her long day, and bedtime was far overdue.

"And don't you forget it. Hmph, you really should be giving me more credit, where would you be without me, dumbass?"

"Probably in a lot of trouble."

Kikyou clearly wasn't completely with it right now, driven to the brink of exhaustion. Placating her would go a long way to getting her to calm down enough to sleep, and I had no reason to keep her up much longer.

"Damn right. Hey, you made me a promise, when're you gonna go through with it. I wanna see Horikita suffer."

"Don't worry, that's part of the plan. I wouldn't forget my promise like that."

She gave me a somewhat threating gesture, waving her hand at me. I had no idea what she was trying to do, and I suspected she didn't either.

"You better not. You owe me big time, and you better pay up."

"Of course."

Kikyou was obviously very tired. Her words had become slightly slurred, and she was leaning more and more on me, unable to hold herself upright. Well, I guess that was the cost of controlling our class for days on end.

I was also suddenly intensely aware of the warmth emanating from her body, as she gave up most of her bodily control to slump against me.

"Goodnight, Kikyou."

"Goodnight, Kiyotaka..."

And then she was asleep. Well, this was inconvenient. I couldn't go poking around inside one of the girls' tents, trying to find a spot for her to sleep, nor could I just leave her out here alone in the cold.

Well, I guess I would be letting someone else use my hammock in the end. There was no way the situation would end well in any circumstance if I tried to share it however, so it was looking to be a cold night ahead for me.

I lifted Kikyou up, and laid her to rest inside my hammock, giving it a slight push so it swung in the cool night breeze. Hopefully, she'd get a good night's sleep, resting up from all the effort she'd put in so far. I was going to cause her an innumerable number of problems in

the next few days, so letting her use my hammock was the least I could do.

I watched her for a bit, as she moved slightly in her sleep, repositioning herself into a more comfortable position. For the first time that I had known her, her face had a genuinely peaceful look on it. Ever since I met her, Kikyou had kept up one façade or another, her over-excited best friend act, the cutest angel in the grade, sadistic cruel Kikyou, or even what she believed to be her true self, the one she only showed to me. But I had never seen her look honestly, genuinely, happy, or at least at peace before this moment.

I had no idea what was going on inside her head. Understanding that wasn't something I could do in these circumstances, and it would take careful prodding of her pressure points to get a decent map of her thoughts, but for this exam that didn't matter. I had placed a lot of pressure on her shoulders, and she was handling it immensely well, far better than I had expected.

The least I could do for my friend was to give her a good night's sleep, and to let her spend some points, so her efforts weren't in total suffering.

My friend, huh?

Was that what she was? I didn't know. I still didn't know what it meant to have a friend, beyond the definition of the word. Whether I cared about her, or just as a valuable pawn was something that was still clouded from my conscious understanding. Was she a queen, the most powerful piece in my control, or someone I wanted to protect, and learn what it was like to connect with another person? All these questions, and none of them I could understand.

Who are you to me, Kushida Kikyou?

Unfortunately, the sleep that had found her wasn't likely to find me for a while yet. I still had things to do. There was no rest for the wicked, after all.

Sorry Kikyou, but you can't stop me from sneaking off.

Authors Notes:

Sorry, I completely forgot to update at the usual time, i got distracted binging Inside Job on netflix. Fucking amazing show go watch it.

Bit of a filler chapter, and I wanted opinion on the characters. Where they too OOC, at least for this story? It felt a bit weird to write, slightly off, but I couldn't make it any better. I dunno, my mental state isn't great right now, with not enough sleep and end of semester exams coming up. Seriously, writing this fic is the only consistency in my life and I need it to keep track of days properly at

this point.

Anyway, more important things. So, what's the deal with Kushida Kikyou? More on that in Arc 4.

I sat down for about two hours today, exclusively thinking about the mental state of Kushida. I had a lecture, you see, and it was on peasant things like statistics. A real mathematician would never lower themselves to leaning fake maths like that. This is just a rough understanding of where I'm going. In two hours, including the writing, I was able to narrow it down to what you've just read. And I'm actually really interested.

I have no idea what I'm going to do or how I'm going to rationalise her actions. This is normally how I think and argue. I come up with something and just start speaking, and my subconscious mind throws out random words that usually end up making a lot of sense. I'm hoping that will happen again with this. From what I've written above, it's what I think the flaw of Kushida is. The two personalities are so separate, so black and white it's hard to reconcile them. That's kinda the point but it's almost unrealistic (I know it's fiction but it's still human), and I'd like to take a closer look onto how she thinks and why she feels this way.

Addicted to love and attention, sure I can buy that. It takes effort because it's not her real personality, absolutely. But if she enjoys it so much, even if it takes effort, should her actions of interacting make her vomit, pull out hair? Maybe it's logical but to me it really seems like a contradiction. I'm going to be specifically re-reading Kushida's parts from the light novel and talking to one of my psyche major friends. Maybe we'll figure something out by the next Arc. Hopefully so. In any case, there will be some deep dive, realistic or not, into her character in arc 4. For now, just enjoy polaroid devil woman.

Arc 3 Chapter 8 - Collapse

The sun rose on the fourth day of our island exam, and with it came the end of my laziness. The time had come to begin making moves once more, and any time to remain at rest in my hammock was past, at least for the most part.

The promise of excitement wasn't the only thing brought on by the rising sun, however. It also brought a return to the ordinary Class D that I had grown accustomed to over the past few months.

That being, I woke to the sound of arguments.

It hadn't been the most comfortable night, due to being forced to sleep against a tree on the ground while Kikyou slept in my hammock, but there wasn't anything I could do about it, besides waking her before anyone noticed.

I reached up and gave her a light shake, followed by a nudge to her cheek.

"Kikyou, time to wake up. Everything's falling apart without you."

Her eyes slowly opened, as if reluctant to wake from her sleep. She'd slept silently for a solid eight hours, with barely any movement, showing just how tired she was.

"Hmm? Kiyotaka... what's going on. Why am I in your hammock?!"

Despite how tired she was at first, at the realisation of where she'd been sleeping, Kikyou woke up fairly quickly.

"You fell asleep, and this was the easiest place for me to put you. Now get down and make them shut up."

Kikyou finally looked around the campsite, and noticed a small group of our classmates standing around the cooking area yelling about something. As usual, it was a divide between boys and girls on either side of the debate, with neither side using any sort of logical reasoning.

"Well?"

We didn't have time to waste. Not only was the class unity collapsing in a rather pathetic way, with a new person joining the conversation every few minutes, but if Kikyou was caught having slept in my hammock, it would be an unnecessary situation to clear

up, something which I didn't have the time nor inclination to do. Plus it could drag her reputation down, which was one of the main benefits in keeping her around.

In the end, the calculations all resulted in the same conclusion. Kikyou needed to hurry up and fix the situation.

"How do I get down?"

Oh. That was a factor I hadn't considered. For me it was easy, simply climbing up and down the trees, but for Kikyou, someone who I suspected hadn't spent much time out of Tokyo in her life, it wasn't an ability she'd developed. Sure, she was relatively fit, above the average of girls her age I suspected, but that didn't translate into being able to climb down trees.

What to do...

"Jump down, I'll catch you."

She looked at me dubiously. From the hammock, although it was only hanging a little over a meter off the ground, it was still a decent distance to drop down.

"Are you sure?"

"We don't really have time to sort out any other way, unless you want me to climb up and carry you down?" That got a glare in response. Good. An angry Kikyou would be much more proactive than a scared one.

She spun her head around quickly, making sure there wasn't anyone watching or had noticed, before swinging her legs over the edge and dropping forward into my waiting arms, where I caught her in a hug just off the ground.

"See, I told you I'd catch you."

"Ugh, let go you pervert."

She pushed herself away from me and out of the hold I had her in. To be fair, it was a rather intimate embrace, the result of catching and pulling her into my chest, but I had no hidden intentions behind it. Whatever got Kikyou into action the fastest was all that mattered to me.

"You're pretty light. I didn't have any problems catching you."

"Hmph, of course I am. You just wanted to hug me, didn't you Kiyotaka. Don't deny it~"

Despite her attempt to keep calm and try to tease me, I could see a hint of blush on her cheek. Apparently, the brief hug and the compliment had been enough to get through the multi-layered shell that was Kushida Kikyou.

"Who wouldn't want to hug a cute girl like you?"

She assumed a smug demeanour of superiority, receiving the complements that she always desired from everyone, yet I could still see redness on her face. It seemed I had affected her more than

I expected. Hopefully this wouldn't impact her ability to rationalise, like it did in all the shows Sotomura had suggested to me. Never again would I go to him to understand my age group.

"Good, at least you recognise my cuteness. Don't you forget it."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Now go clean up my mess."

She formed her angel façade for the first time today and moved to see what the argument was about. I'm sorry, Kikyou but all I'm going to do from now on is cause you problems.

I could guess with a pretty high degree of certainty what they were upset about, based on my actions last night and where they were standing. On the second night of the exam, I'd spent time making my way around the island in the dark, ensuring that I had a good ability to navigate without any source of unnatural light. During this time I'd found a quiet and isolated place I could camp out if needed.

Last night, I had stolen a couple of essential cooking utensils and hidden them there. It was becoming increasingly more likely that I would have to leave the campsite, if only to torture Class B some more, and I had the tools needed.

Besides, this conflict was the precursor to an entirely unrelated experiment. Not all of the cooking utensils had made it to the campsite.

"Ike! Why are the matches in your bag then!"

"Why the hell should I know! You girls were the ones cooking last night!"

It had worked far more dramatically than I had expected. No matter how many times I saw my classmates act irrationally, it still impressed me at how quickly they could fall apart over the smallest things.

I could see Kikyou inserting herself into the middle of the group, and more and more of our classmates came over as they began to emerge from the various tents around the clearing. The yelling had quietened down now, becoming angry muttering, but in the end, it came to nothing.

There wasn't anything missing from the campsite, and no one had been hurt, so there was no real reason for anyone to be angry, aside from their irrational dislike of their classmates.

That was at least for now.

Because eventually, someone would notice the missing things, as the day progressed. Some had been hidden with the girls, some with the boys, and some wouldn't show up again.

I hadn't made the mistake of taking anything that would have to be replaced. Everything I had could be used for my survival effectively, and if the class didn't have it, they would still be able to

get buy, just with less convenience than before. There was no reason to spend any more points, besides what I had told Kikyou to spend.

I couldn't be bothered getting breakfast now, since the entire class was crowded around the cooking area pushing their way forward to get food, and I didn't really feel the need to eat. Instead, I turned away from the campsite and made my way down to the beach, where Class C had been setup on the second day.

By my calculations, they should have run out of points by now, having given most of them to Class A and spending the remaining ones on whatever they wanted. Unless Class C intended to live off foraged food and bugs, the entire class, bar Ryuuen and Kaneda should have retired back onto the cruise by now.

If most people found out about it, they would probably feel a little jealous. Yes, to the average student it would appear that Class C wasn't going to receive any points, meaning that we had something to hold over their heads, but the fact was we were stuck on a deserted island slowly making it day by day with minimal food, while they got to relax on a cruise ship, eating high quality meals and relaxing by a pool for a week.

Yes, they may have lost the exam, but unlike everyone else they were having a true holiday.

I reached the beach where Kikyou and I had met with Ryuuen two days ago, to find a ghost town. Previously it had been filled with raucous noise, food and drinks and all manner of entertainment, now it was barren. Not a single thing nor person was left.

This did raise a question. Ryuuen had obviously figured out the rules of retirement were a joke just to keep people to participating in the exam. He had gotten his entire class to retire out of illness, although I doubted any of them possessed and injury serious enough to retire. So was it possible he had figured out the loophole in the rules for the leader?

It was entirely possible he had. Ryuuen was a crafty free thinker, someone likely to recognise the strategy that seemed impossible at first understanding. Unfortunately for him, he would still be forced to meet with me on the sixth day, in order to give me the leader. If he didn't show up, all it would do was arouse my suspicions. All I had to do following that meeting was keep an eye on him and ensure he didn't retire in that time.

"Oh wow, this is seriously a surprise! I knew he wasn't normal, but I didn't realize to what extent."

I heard voices behind me, as two other people arrived.

"Did you come here to spy around too, Ayanokouji?"

It was Ichinose and Kanzaki from Class B. I wondered if they had come here to see how Class C was doing, too.

"Actually, I was hoping to meet with Ryuuen again to make a deal, but it seems I'm too late. I guess I should have believed him when he said he wasn't taking the exam seriously."

"While the two of them hid in the shade, they'd observed what kind of state Class C was in. As for why they were hiding, well, they had a reason.

"Oh wow, there's no one around anymore. It's just like you said, Kanzaki-kun. Seems like their strategy was to retire."

Ichinose scratched her cheek and sighed in disappointment.

"We thought we could at least find out who Class C's leader was. Was it pointless, though? If they've all withdrawn, we won't be able to find any hints."

"Didn't Class C already use up all of their points? Even if we found out who their leader is, doesn't that mean they won't get a penalty?"

"They said that we wouldn't see any negative effects during the second semester, so our points shouldn't be able to go below zero."

Ichinose pursed her lips, looking bored. All we could see in the former campsite was a big empty space.

"It's a really good strategy from Ryuuen. I'm impressed." I shared my genuine feelings on Ryuuen's plan with Ichinose and Kanzaki. I wasn't going to tell them anything, but I was curious if they could see through the ploy.

"You must be seeing something different to me, Ayanokouji. From where I'm standing Ryuuen has lost the exam already." Kanzaki, it seemed, was too narrow minded to conceive of anything outside of the rules, at least to the extent that Ryuuen had.

"That's just because you aren't playing by the same rules as he is. Ryuuen doesn't care about winning but think about class moral."

"Mhm, you're right about that, Ayanokouji-kun! Class C is going to have a pretty awesome week, compared to the other classes. Instead of stress they'll get a break from everything. But I didn't expect Ryuuen to make a plan with his class in consideration, it's unusually kind of him."

"But as soon as the results are announced they'll be crushed again. When every other class gains points, will it really be worth having a good vacation to his classmates?"

I sighed. Both Ichinose and Kanzaki, despite their intelligence, couldn't see the bigger picture as usual. Ichinose was so focused on working together as a class, and positive relations, she couldn't imaging any form of betrayal or backstabbing, which is why Kaneda would be successful.

Kanzaki, while he was more attuned to strategy, was still too narrow-minded to understand Ryuuen. It wasn't a surprise, but no one was capable of countering a plan they couldn't conceive. Since Kanzaki couldn't forsee nor understand Ryuuen's actions, there was no way for him to defend against such tactics. He'd been distracted by the smoke and mirrors of the Class C campsite and their retirement, missing the real threat by trying to uncover the plan where there wasn't one.

"That's where the three of us come in. We're the ones who will make Ryuuen's plan succeed."

Both of them turned to me in shock, not understanding what I was saying.

"Eh? What are you talking about Ayanokouji-kun?!"

"Are you saying you've teamed up with Ryuuen?"

Exactly right Kanzaki, you've hit the nail on the head.

"What I'm saying is Ryuuen is betting on our classes competing for leaders. Class A, B and D will guess leaders and drag each other down, meaning his class will only lose by about 100 points. For a week's vacation, that seems like a fair trade to me."

Both of them stared at me, mouths open slightly in realisation. From what I had explained, Ryuuen had predicted the nature of the competition and used it in his favour. By taking a small loss, and gambling on the assurance that the other classes would try and compete, he'd only take a small loss.

Kanzaki furrowed his brow in concentration, trying to figure out whether what I was saying was right, and if there was a way for Class B to still guess leaders without Ryuuen being victorious in the ficticious plan I had presented them with.

Ichinose on the other hand had a determined look on her face, and hands on hips gave me a proposal.

"Then there's only one thing to do. Ayanokouji-kun, Class A, B and D need to form an alliance and not guess each other's leaders. Then Ryuuen will lose. Do we have a deal?"

She stuck her hand out for a handshake, confident in our mutual need to team up. What an idiotic suggestion.

"Don't insult my intelligence with such a stupid proposal Ichinose."

"Eh?!"

Ichinose looked slapped at my response. It wasn't the most considerate way of answering her offer, but in truth it was an insult, both to me and the position my class was in to make such a deal.

"No, Ichinose-san, he's right. Ayanokouji can't make a deal like that."

Kanzaki understood at least this, thankfully, so I didn't have to

explain it to her alone. I had assistance from Ichinose's side.

"True, I could ally myself with Class B to take down Class C. But that doesn't solve the problem that Class D is at a huge defecit."

"But... you'll be helping Ryuuen out. You're doing what he wants."

"Yes. And yet I'm going to do it anyway."

Ichinose had a crestfallen expression across her face, at the realisation that her offer for an alliance was such a mistake, and that I'd taken it as an insult. She appeared to realise just how weak of an offer it had been, made only in consideration of Class B and C, but not thinking at all about Class D.

"I take it you're still going to guess our leader then. Have you made any progress in narrowing down who it is since we last spoke?"

Kanzaki, ever the focused man, prodded the conversation along in light of Ichinose's momentary distraction.

"I haven't done anything yet. I'll get around to it soon enough though. But yes, I will be taking on Class A, B and C all at once. It would be delusional to think that Class D would make a deal with anyone, when we have such a good chance of winning."

"You're serious, aren't you Ayanokouji-kun? You're going to take on the grade alone. This isn't Class D you're talking about, you don't have their support, it's just you. You really think you can beat everyone by yourself."

"I know I can. I'll see you on the last day, Ichinose, Kanzaki."

I turned to leave the beach. My main goal of checking whether Class C had really retired had been completed the moment I got here, but the conversation with Ichinose and Kanzaki had been much more valuable. They would never be able to relax for the rest of the week now.

"Don't you think that's rather conceited of you?"

"Is it conceited if I know it for a fact Kanzaki? Good luck in the exam."

I left the two of them behind, standing in the shade of the trees lining the beach. They obviously had things to discuss, and I had gotten everything I wanted out of the conversation. Now the only question left was whether they'd retaliate, try to make moves in this exam, or continue on with their doomed defensive strategy they had so far been resolute in following.

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By the end of the day, four more arguments had sparked in the campsite over missing equipment. It hadn't taken much, but by now the entire campsite had been split in two, the vocal boys and girls forming their sides and now allowing anyone to take the middle ground, not even Kikyou.

I'd been watching from my hammock all day, the silent observer, and it was clear that only a few people were really involved with the arguments. The majority of the class simply sighed and tried to make do with the situation, but on either side there were a half a dozen people who couldn't let any slight or insult go unchecked.

It was a testament to the patience of most of my classmates that they simply put up with the arguments and continued on with their day. Like yesterday, there wasn't much to be done around the campsite, leaving the vocal minority free to argue and yell, and those not interested to find places spread around the campsite where they could be kept out of any arguments.

Luckily, it seemed the 'secret' that I had leaked to Inogashira and Ichihashi had made its way around the girl's side of the campsite, so they were kind enough to cut Kikyou some slack. Either that, or it was the fans and mattresses I'd seen being smuggled into the girls tents, probably on her suggestion.

She had been able to take the boys side whenever forced to choose or was allowed to at least mediate the situation to some extent. Even so, she'd managed to pull out of the leadership role somewhat and allowed to camp to split into the two sides, Ike and Yamauchi vs Shinohara and Karuizawa. Neither side allowed the other to get away with anything, and any problems supposedly caused by themselves were blameless issues. It was the most stubborn headed situation I had ever seen, to a degree which seemed unrealistic.

Perfect. It had all gone to plan.

"You owe me for this."

Kikyou and I were standing at the base of my hammock, recapping the day's events, and making sure I was kept abreast of the state of the class. Although I was watching all day, I couldn't notice every detail, and listening to conversations would tell a lot more than simply observing.

"I'll buy you lunch when we get back."

"You know that's not what I meant. Anyway, you've broken the class. Congratulations. What next?"

What next indeed. I was on a timer for how long I could continue my experiment. I realistically had until the end of tomorrow before I had to leave, in order to get the most value out of my plan. But luckily, everything had gone perfectly enough that I still had time for the final thing.

"Tomorrow I'll be leaving the campsite, under the guise of retiring. In actuality, I'll be hiding on the island to finish my deal with Ryuuen."

"You're leaving?"

"Yeah."

I could see Kikyou was surprisingly nervous about the thought. It wasn't much, just a slight shift in her demeanour, but I could tell it worried her a little. Despite all her talent as a manipulator, despite her solid position in the class and the relative easiness that she would have to get through the rest of the week, it seemed the lack of my presence would be a concern for her.

"Right. Will you need me to do anything then?" Down to business it seemed. No time for any banter like usual.

"I'll get in contact with you later, but for the most part just keep the camp running as best you can."

"That's easy enough, as long as you aren't going to be causing any more problems. Everyone seems to have accepted the split for the most part, so it really shouldn't be too hard to get through the week."

I fully agreed with what Kikyou had said. The camp, divided as it was, would still function well enough to get to the end of the week. Even with my next plan, the situation probably couldn't get worse. But even so she wasn't going to like it.

"Actually, I have one more thing for you to do tonight, once everyone is asleep."

I explained what I had in mind, which earned me a glare.

"You can't be serious."

"Deadly."

She huffed in exasperation.

"Ok, I actually have no idea now. So far everything you've done has made at least a bit of sense, but I don't' get it. How in the hell will this help?"

This was the moment of truth, when I revealed that I had been unnecessarily causing her problems. This had the potential to go very badly for me.

"In regards to the exam, it won't help at all. Actually, the divide in the class has nothing to do with the exam."

She stared at me, mouth open in shock, clear confusion in her crimson eyes.

"But... why? God, the amount of arguments I've stopped today, and it's got nothing to do with the exam, and now you want me to do this?"

"Kikyou, I'm focused on the future. The results of this exam are more or less set in stone, so I'm using this as a chance to run an experiment."

She cocked her head to the side questioningly.

"An experiment?"

"On how our class functions. I need to know how easy it is to

break our class apart, so I can prepare for that in the future. You really think Ryuuen won't try and exploit something as funny as Ike and Shinohara's catfight?"

She giggled a little at my joke at the end. It seemed my bullshit reason had made enough sense that she'd bought it at face value, or at least trusted me enough that she'd follow through with the plan.

"God, I wanted to laugh so badly when she slapped him. They're so dumb, it's hilarious to watch."

"So?"

She sighed, apparently acquiescing my request.

"Fine. I suppose it's better I do it than you. This experiment better be worth it."

I hope it's worth it too, otherwise I've just wasted two days where I could be doing things.

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I woke in my hammock the next day to the sound of raised voices. Once again, I hadn't gotten to sleep until nearly dawn, so I was still a little bleary eyed when I peered over the edge to see what was going on.

"Hey, boys. Can you all gather around?"

The voice sounded rough, like she'd meant to say, "Hurry and wake already!"

"What the hell? God, I'm so goddamn tired..." An irritated Sudou appeared from the tent and looked around.

"Wake up all the boys, Sudou-kun. We need to have a little chat with them. It's serious," demanded Shinohara.

Whether she was flustered or angry, the issue didn't seem to be hers alone. A little further away, the girls glared at the boys emerging from the tent.

"Ugh, whatever. If it'll get you to leave us alone."

Within two minutes, the boys came out of the tent rubbing their sleepy eyes. When the half-asleep boys looked around, they inferred that this situation was especially alarming. The girls all looked unusually scared.

"What's going on? Why did you wake us up so early?"

Shinohara gave all the boys who had woken up a look of complete contempt, before glancing over to where I was.

"Ayanokouji-kun! You too, get down and come over here."

"Shinohara-san, I don't think Kiyotaka-kun had anything to do with it, he's not that sort of person. Besides, he's been keeping to himself the whole time, I really don't think it was him."

Kikyou quickly moved over to where Shinohara was standing in front of the boys and gave her opinion, trying to keep me out of the situation. I would have to thank her for that later, but it seemed to

have no effect on the single-mindedness that Shinohara was possessing right now.

"I know he's your friend Kushida-san, and I also think he probably didn't do it, but everyone's a suspect. You here that Ayanokouji-kun? Get over here!"

I groaned, having failed to be rescued by Kikyou, but I made my way down from the hammock and once again wrapped it around myself, before joining the boys standing outside their tent.

"What's going on, Shinohara."

"Well, this morning...Karuizawa-san's underwear went missing. Do you know what this means?"

"U-underwear?"

Even Hirata, who still hadn't changed from his broke state, appeared visibly shaken. Speaking of Karuizawa, she was missing, along with some of her friends.

"Karuizawa-san is crying inside the tent right now. Satou-san and others are comforting her right now, but..." Shinohara looked over to the girls' tent.

There it was. The reaction I had been seeking. I had had Kikyou steal and then dispose of the underwear last night discretely, in a way that no one would ever know. She had adamantly refused to just get them and pass them onto me as I initially suggested, a fact I was rather impressed by. Despite having complete control over her, and despite how she usually didn't question my commands, it seemed there were lines Kikyou was unwilling to cross, at least without me forcing her to. After everything she had said against Karuizawa, it seemed she still respected the girls privacy enough to try and keep her underwear away from a boy.

While there would be suspicion on the boys from the girls forever, if they weren't located, then more and more people would grow to think they had simply been misplaced. I didn't want to start a serious divide in the class, all I cared about was how Karuizawa would react.

And react she did, in a very unexpected way. Ever since she had been breaking off more and more from Hirata, her actions had become more hesitant, as if she was less sure of herself without him around to protect her. I had noticed it at the start of the year, when she reacted very severely to the attack I gave to the class, more than anyone else. The bullying I put down on all of them made her especially concerned, even terrified for a moment, before she covered it back up. This was just the final piece of evidence I needed. Karuizawa Kei the Gyaru was an act she put on. If it wasn't, the disappearance of her underwear wouldn't have driven her to tears; instead, she would have been out here with Shinohara yelling

at us.

Now I understood Karuizawa much better than before. It was something I could possibly exploit, and yes. She would be suitable as the final pawn on my board.

"Shinohara. Explain now."

To the surprise of everyone, Hirata had stood up, with fire in his eyes and steel in his voice, in a way that no one had ever heard before. All traces of the empty man before were gone

"Isn't it obvious Hirata? Karuizawa's underwear is missing, so obviously one of the boys took it."

"Huh? Huh? What? Why are you accusing us over her underwear being missing?"

"Isn't that obvious? Someone went through her bag in the middle of the night and stole them. Our luggage was outside the tent, so if someone wanted to steal something, they easily could have!"

The boys, still in a state of drowsiness, all exchanged looks.

"No, no, no, no! Huh?! Huh?!"

Ike, in a complete panic, looked back and forth between the boys and girls. One of the boys who'd been observing all this grumbled calmly.

"Come to think of it, Ike, you were pretty late getting back from the toilet yesterday. You took a really long time."

"No, no, no! That was just, well...I was struggling because it was dark!"

"Is that so? You stole Karuizawa's underwear, didn't you?"

"Y-you're wrong! I didn't do it!"

The boys started blaming one another for this particularly nasty crime. It was disappointing. If they had kept a united front, and simply defended each other, there would be less of an argument from the girl's side. But they were so desperate to stay out of trouble themselves, that they instantly turned on each other. That was an important fact to remember. The boys in Class D could be bribed with anything and would turn on each other in an instant. I would never be able to rely on them for anything.

But that just made it all the more fun.

"Anyway. This is a huge problem, don't you agree? It's impossible for us to camp alongside a bunch of underwear thieves," said Shinohara, her arms crossed. She looked as though she was going to lose her temper.

"Kiyotaka-kun, can you find the culprit?"

Kikyou made another suggestion, attempting to pul me out of the line of fire once again.

"I mean, it seems most likely to me that she just lost it. But if you want proof just go through our stuff. There's nowhere else to hide

them."

"Huh? Don't give us that crap. We don't need to do that!"

It seemed the boys had finally formed a united front, against the one solution to the problem. Fantastic.

"Heh? What's the problem with showing us?! If you don't have them then there's no problem right!"

"That's not the point! What about our privacy!"

And the arguments started up again, this time however including almost everyone in the class. Even those who had previously stayed out of them got involved this time, understandably for both times. For the boys, none of them wanted to cave and give in their privacy for a rather unjustified accusation. Really, Shinohara had no right to be so accusatory towards the boys simply because she disliked them.

On the girls' side, even those who had stayed out of arguments had been affected by this. The thought of an underwear thief was enough to scare them, pushing even the isolationists like Hasebe into the yelling. Everyone but Karuizawa, as far as I could tell, had exited the tent they were in, hearing the commotion and joining the argument.

It was looking like a small brawl was going to break out, but even so Hirata was still sitting off to the side simply watching what was going on. 33 students all pushing in against each other, yelling and accusing, it was a sight to behold. I was aware that the school created Class D with defective students particularly, but still, if the teachers actually expected this class to function, then they clearly had no idea how dysfunctional these students truly were.

"Everyone shut up!"

Over the course of the past few minutes, Hirata's face had been going through every possible emotion known to man.

"Oi, Hirata, you aren't gonna let them get away with this right?!"

"No, Hirata won't let you search our stuff, he's on our side!"

"Shut! Up!" There was a fire in his eyes, a resolve to do what was necessary. This was incredibly unexpected. "All the boys, get your stuff out! Now! Prove that you didn't do anything, and girls? Don't go throwing around accusations without proof. It's disgraceful."

He took a stand, but on the third position no one yet inhabited, against the entire class, chosing the option that made the most people unhappy, but at the same time resolved the situation in the most efficient manner. Incredible.

"Oi, Hirata, we don't have to do that! Back off, you bastard."

In response to Ike's refusal, Hirata moved in a way that no one expected, focing me to move quickly to intervene. As Hirata's fist swung forward in order to hit Ike in the stomache, I grabbed it at

the last second, halting it in place.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Hirata."

The entire class was silent, trying to process what they had just witnessed. One of the class pillers, the only male figure the girls respected, had just tried to organise and solve the problem through the use of violence. His face was a mask of pain, anger and regret. Obviously, this wasn't something he wanted to do, but for whatever reason felt this was the only way to control the situation. With the way he hadn't hesitated, it was clear he wasn't the saint everyone had thought he was.

"I don't want to do this, Ayanokouji-kun. Not again..." He whispered the last part, low enough than even I, standing right next to him, could barely hear it, but it confirmed my theory. This was why Hirata was in Class D. This wasn't the first time he had fought to assert his supremacy.

"Back off Hirata, before I make you. We'll show our bags, once you go cool off for a bit."

He took a shuddering breath, before pulling his hand back towards his side, recomposing himself back to some of the shell he had been before. It seemed that since he couldn't hold his own against me enough to get the class to cooperate, he was out of ideas with how to solve the situation, with how to help Karuizawa. I was sure she was going to hear about this, about how useless Hirata had been.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, Ike-kun." He turned and walked away from the campsite into the jungle, probably to spend some time alone thinking about what had just happened.

In the meantime, I had passed my bag to Shinohara, who had finished going through it.

"Ayanokouji-kun's clear. Now for the rest of you. Hand them over!"

Compliance was the easiest response after what had just happened, and it seemed the rest of the boys didn't want a repeat of the situation, so they quietly handed over the bags, and a few of the girls began going through them.

I moved off to the side with Kikyou, who had been watching it all go down.

"Well, that was rather successful."

"So it worked?"

"With very unexpected results. Thank you for helping me with that."

"Eh, it's worth it to see the idiots acting like themselves."

"Well, I suppose it's time for me to go. Good luck with the class."

"Good luck dealing with Ryuuen."

"Make sure that Class B hears I've retired. I have no idea whether they'll get more or less paranoid, but either way it's helpful."

"Got it."

We said our goodbyes, before I loudly called out a name.

"Chabashira. I'm sick of camping with this class, I'd like to retire."

The people in the centre of the argument didn't hear at first, but those hanging to the outskirts did, and like a reverse ripple, the knowledge that I was retiring made its way to everyone in the class.

"Fine. Let's go back to the boat then, Ayanokouji."

She really trusted me to follow through and win, it seemed, that she didn't even question my actions.

"Wait Ayanokouji what are you talking about!"

"Yeah, you can't retire, it'll cost us points!"

"You aren't even hurt, you bastard!"

"You're just as bad as Kouenji!"

"If you're retiring, can I have your hammock?"

I ignored all the insults and questions as I walked away from the campsite with Chabashira following next to me. I had no time nor inclination to answer any of their demands, especially after the shameful display they had just shown over an unfounded accusation.

Once we reached the boat, I stopped, and took a moment to make sure that no one had followed us before speaking to Chabashira. We were the only two around, with the nearest teachers being the exam supervisors guarding the boat ramp.

"You aren't actually retiring, are you?"

I could hear the concern in her voice, but it was unwarranted.

"Of course not. I just have things to do outside of camp, and it makes life easier if they suspect I've retired."

"So, you're still planning on winning the exam?"

"Yes, and to do that I'll need your help."

There was one thing left, and I could manage it on my own, but having Chabashira do it for me served two purposes. One, it was much less suspicious, and two, it would be a test to see whether she truly was willing to bend the rules to help me win. I needed to see just how much she wanted to become Class A, and how far I could push her.

"There's only so much I can do. Teachers are supposed to remain impartial of course."

"Of course. First, I'd like to purchase a pair of walkie-talkies on an isolated frequency, along with some paper. And could I borrow your pen?"

"Fine."

Chabashira handed me a piece of paper and a pen, before moving

off to procure the walkie-talkies for me. I quickly filled out what I needed, and hid the paper in my pocket safely before she returned.

Once she did, she offered me both the walkie-talkies but I only took one, pushing the other back towards her.

"This is what I need from you. Discretely give the other to Kushida and tell her to contact me once everyone else is asleep. If you can do that, then I can win the exam."

Authors Notes:

Right, first thing. Y2V5 is out. I haven't read it yet. I would appreciate it if no one spoiled it. Not that I'm expecting people to, but things slip peoples minds all the time and accidents happen. I'd like to keep this a spoiler free fic, as much as possible. As soon as there is a MTL, or if there is one already please link it, I'll read it so I'm up to date. It's sad being kinda forced off the subreddit even though there's spoiler tags because I have no self control.

It's like a big button. I can't help but go ooo obscured image must see.

In regards to this chapter, it ended up being a lot longer than I thought. It's massive. I was expecting it to be a little more than half it's length, and this is it after heavy cutting down. I'm pretty proud of it. It was a solid chapter, and my beta actually gave me positive feedback instead of just pointing out mistakes or sending :thumbs up: on discord, the useless bastard.

Not much to say other than that, it was a good chapter, all pretty self explanitory. Next chapter is a banger, and also one of the original ideas I had for the fic, so hype for that.

Check out @MightyAsmodeus and his two fics. Both of them are great, especially his react one. It's done some scenes I've never seen before so be sure to check that out. No ulterior motives with this promotion whatsoever, I swear

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 9 - Leader

My fever was getting worse. I had thought I could hold out, but six days into the island exam and I was barely able to function.

I had a job to do. That thought was the only thing that kept me going at this point. I had been entrusted with the role of class leader, the only person who could use the keycard to secure our spot.

It was a shame that we hadn't been able to claim any others, since the other classes probably had two or three extra spots each at least, but with my health so deteriorated there was nothing we could do.

There also wasn't anyone I trusted to claim a spot with me.

Out of the entire class, only Ayanokouji was someone I respected, and even that only went so far. He was an enigma, someone I couldn't understand in the slightest. I accepted his immense talents, but even so...

He told me not to trust him. He told me himself, and that was something I couldn't ignore.

No, in this class I truly am alone.

And that was fine. I had always been alone. I had no need for friends or allies, and now wasn't any different. Except it was.

I couldn't do this alone, at least not in my current condition. For the last two days, the only time I had moved was to secure the spot every eight hours, an action that hampered my ability to sleep properly and recover from my illness as effectively, or when I went to the toilet or rinsed my face in the river.

It doesn't matter, though. I can't retire. That was the only way out from my illness, and the cost of 30 points was too high.

I made my way back from the spot controller, after reclaiming the spot for another eight hours, and returned to the tent where I spent most of my time. Luckily I had established on the first few days that I wasn't interested in getting involved with any games or activities, and my responsibility to claim the spot got me out of every other job on the campsite. All of this meant that I was left alone almost all the time, to rest and take the seven-hour window I had to try and recover somewhat from my fever.

Once I reached the tent, I was left to ponder once again how the

girls had obtained such luxuries. I wasn't one to complain about it, since due to my illness, the fans and mats made it much easier to rest than a sleeping bag on the ground, but it seemed incredibly irresponsible to be wasting points on such pointless luxuries.

It was made that much more confusing to learn that it was Kushida who suggested the idea.

Kushida, who since day one, had been organising and running the class, controlling and limiting what we spent points on as much as was reasonable, had been the one to suggest spending points on such trivial luxuries. It was a suspicious choice, and I suspected one of the two consistencies wasn't her idea.

Once again, it all came back to Ayanokouji. I'd been watching him over the past few days, as he lazed around the campsite in his hammock, and the only person I'd seen him interact with was Kushida. Clearly, they were working together, or more likely, he was running the show from the shadows.

Kushida was a smart student. I'd seen her scores in class, and while they weren't close to me, they were well above average, nothing to scoff at. Despite that, I didn't think she was the one in charge of our camp. Sure, she was capable of organising the points, and delegating tasks since most of the class blindly trusted and followed her, but was she capable of winning the exam?

No, but Ayanokouji was.

He was the one who made me the leader. Even now, after thinking about it, I couldn't understand his reasoning. Yes, out of everyone, I certainly was a good candidate to be leader, something that I'm sure he recognised when he made me leader. It wasn't an impulse decision, but a rational one, that even Kouenji had recognised as the best choice.

It didn't explain why he didn't make himself leader, however. I'm sure Ayanokouji must have noticed my illness. I wasn't trying to hide it, and as I'd learnt the hard way, he was an incredibly perceptive person. He must have known I was sick, so picking me made no sense. He could have been the leader himself and claimed the extra spots that I can't in my current condition, yet he placed the burden of leadership on me.

Was he trying to win the exam? He was controlling the class, that much I was certain of, but his actions made no sense, at least under the assumption he was working towards victory. I couldn't imagine him putting in this much effort if he wasn't though, especially since he helped Sudou, simply because he wanted to win. What else could he be doing on his island?

I had seen him a few times at night, when everyone else was asleep and I was securing the spot, returning from who knows

where in the forest. His dissapearances, along with his warning to me were very suspect.

'Don't trust me, Horikita. I don't have the best intentions towards our class. The only person I work for is me.'

Those were the words he said, and I couldn't get them out of my head. No one in their right mind would tell you not to trust them. Trust was the foundation of good relations, of a functioning society, yet he was going out of his way to make sure I didn't. But the way he said it was the strangest part of all.

It was like he was warning me. It wasn't a threat, or a promise of betrayal, but a warning that something was coming. I couldn't shake the feeling that he was trying to tell me something, but whatever it was, was beyond me.

Then there was his comment from just before he said that.

'Good work securing the spot. You'll make a great leader yet.'

It was as if he was testing me, and giving me the role of leader was a way for him to see whether I had the necessary qualifications to take the role. Perhaps he wanted to see if I had potential, if I was worth backing to become class leader, because clearly he had no intention of taking up the role, ruling from the shadows through Kushida as he currently was.

What a distasteful notion. As if I needed his approval, or his recognition as a good leader. I was far and beyond almost anyone in the grade, expect perhaps Ayanokouji and Kouenji, and academically maybe Sakayanagi, but that was it. There was no one else who could match me in any manner that held any value, and for him to be testing me now, was an insult to my capabilities.

I didn't need Ayanokouji's support. I didn't need his help to become a leader. If I wanted to, I could have become one. I could have run this Class and won the island exam on my own. I wasn't Kushida, who needed Ayanokouji to give instructions. I was capable all on my own.

I had also attributed the other incidents to him. The utensils and such going missing occurred on the same night I had seen him sneaking around. If he was trying to cause discourse, then it was working. If he was giving them to an enemy class as part of the betrayal he warned me about, then that was stupid. He didn't take enough for them to be of any value, so clearly his objective was to cause problems. The reason for that I didn't know.

The underwear was an interesting incident. That, I suspected, had nothing to do with him. Yes, perhaps causing conflict had been his intention, but it had been successful enough without resorting to such disgusting methods. I didn't think that was something that interested Ayanokouji, I begrudgingly admitted, since he seemed to

show no interest in the other sex. No, even if he had done it, there would have been a far larger divide if they had been found with a boy. Missing that opportunity was also not like him.

Then there was the matter of his retirement. If there was a grand plan or scheme behind it, I couldn't figure it out. Maybe he had betrayed the class. He had given my name up, stolen some items and caused problems, convinced Kushida to waste points and then left once his job was done. If someone had paid him off with the promise of private points, then there was nothing to be done. Our class had probably lost.

But Ayanokouji wasn't interested in point either, as far as I could tell.

It was useless, trying to speculate what went on in his head, as convoluted and disturbing as it probably was. Ayanokouji was fundamentally different from me, that much I had accepted, and to think that I could understand his reasoning was laughable. It was much like a mentally deranged person, to them their ideas made perfect sense, but to everyone else they were impossible to grasp.

I suspected his mind was much like that.

I didn't know the outcome of the trial, but I had heard enough rumours, and Sudou had spoken non-stop to me about it, apologising for his actions surprisingly, it seemed he had learned his lesson, and from that I had picked up what Ayanokouji had done.

Everything had fallen into place for him, in a completely brutal and decisive way. Whether he had any part in what happened to Sakura was not relevant; the way he had manipulated the situation was awesome.

It was useless trying to speculate what he was planning. Ayanokouji was gone now, and there was nothing I could do to stop whatever happened. The situation was out of my hands now, and all I could do was try and sleep, to get a little bit better from my fever before I had to claim the spot again.

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I was woken to someone shaking my shoulder late at night. My mind wasn't quite on yet, but I could hear someone whispering in my ear as the shook me, harder and harder each time. It seemed whatever they needed was rather urgent. Unfortunately, they should have gone to anyone else.

"Horikita-san. Wake up!"

Oh. It was Kushida. She was speaking as loudly as she could without waking anyone else in the tent, but I still couldn't tell why she wanted me.

"It's Kiyotaka-kun, you need to come talk to him."

That sent my eyes opening wide. My brain kicked into gear and I saw Kushida kneeling next to me, a hand on my shoulder where she'd been shaking me, and a walkie-talkie in her other hand.

"Ayanokouji-kun?"

"He told me to wake you up. He needs to see you and the key card. He's got a plan to win the exam."

So, this was his strategy. It was very suspicious of him to have retired, but it seemed he'd been hiding out on the island alone all this time. It made more sense now why he'd been stealing cooking utensils, and why he'd kept the hammock with him. Everything fit into place. And now he'd come to me for help, to win the exam. I knew he wouldn't give up.

"Get off me. I'll be up in a moment."

"Hurry, Horikita-san. Kiyotaka-kun said we don't have long."

What could be time sensitive? Perhaps he was intending to claim a lot of spots. If he was, he would be in for a rude awakening upon seeing how ill I was. Having just rested, I was probably well enough to run for a bit, but if he was expecting hours of movement, he would be sorely disappointed.

I climbed out of the tent and found Kushida waiting for me.

"Where'd you get the walkie-talkie?"

I'd had a look at the expenditure sheet, and a pair of them, as I assumed that Ayanokouji had the other, wasn't on it. Then again, neither were the fans and mats in the tents, so I expect anything was possible.

"Kiyotaka-kun bought them when he pretended to retire."

She started to leave the campsite, moving quickly and quietly along a path into the jungle. I followed quickly, easily keeping up with her despite her illness. We weren't moving too fast, but fast enough that anyone who didn't know where Kushida was going would have a hard time following us in the darkness.

"So you're working with him then?"

"Yep! We're going to win the exam, Horikita-san. This is all part of his plan."

There was a strange feeling inside of me at that. He hadn't betrayed us, he hadn't betrayed me. Everything had been done as part of his meticulous unknowable plan in order to win the exam. If that was the case, then maybe he was wrong. Maybe I could trust him.

And there he was, leaning against a tree in a clearing we had reached. His hammock was strung up nearby, along with the missing cooking utensils. It wasn't much, just a pan and a spatula, but it was enough to make a meal from what I assumed was a fish he had caught.

"Horikita."

"Ayanokouji-kun."

"Thanks for your help, Kikyou. You can go back to camp now." He gave her a look, with something else hidden in his eyes, but in this darkness, I couldn't tell what it was. She gave him a smile, before turning around and heading back to camp. Clearly she trusted him enough, and believed that whatever he needed with me would go well. The fact that she didn't ask questions was a testament to her faith.

I waited until I couldn't hear her anymore, before asking what was on my mind.

"You didn't retire clearly. So, you're planning on winning the exam then?"

"You really are naïve, aren't you Horikita."

I took a step back at that, unsure as to why he would say that.

"What do you mean?"

"I told you, didn't I? I told you not to trust me. You can come out now."

He said the last part louder than anything else, as if speaking to someone else. And it seemed he was indeed. From the darkness behind him came the leaders of Class A and C, Katsuragi and Ryuuen. It was a trap.

"Do we really need to be so theatrical about this?"

"Kukuku what's the problem, baldy? Ayanokouji's the one getting the key card, we're the ones making the scene fuckign epic."

I went cold at their words. He had betrayed me, just like he warned. Damn. It was a stupid mistake to trust him, to believe Kushida when she called for me. To think I trusted him just because he was smart, just because he was on the same level as me, I believed we'd be working for the same things. That was my shortcoming, in not understanding him.

The fact was Ayanokouji and Kushida had betrayed me.

No, probably not Kushida. While she was working under his orders, he had sent her away, meaning he didn't want her around for this. They probably had an agreement, and Ayanokouji had betrayed her too. That was something, at least. There was one person who didn't know the full extent of his betrayal that I could use.

If only I could figure a way out of this situation.

"You betrayed us."

"Obviously. Between a class split in two, or an offer of private points, which seems like the better deal."

"Hurry up, Ayanokouji. I don't know what you're doing, but you promised us the leader key card, and this teasing is just cruel."

"Speak for yourself, Katsuragi. I'm rather enjoying Suzune leaning just how fucked her class is."

Ryuuen directed a carnivorous grin my way, enjoying the precarious situation I was in. I only had once chance to fake them out, but even so it wasn't likely. Ryuuen and Katsuragi clearly needed the leader's key card to be sure Ayanokouji wouldn't betray them as well, so if I could keep it hidden, then perhaps the situation wouldn't go as badly.

"It's a shame Ayanokouji-kun has betrayed you too as well. I'm not the leader."

"Horikita, don't bother. There's two ways this can go. Either you give me the card, or I take it from you."

He really meant it. He was going to beat me down and take the card from my hands, or at least try to. I'd seen him fight nii-san, but I doubted nii-san was really trying. No, I could at least hold my own against Ayanokouji, even in the state I was in right now.

"You know I'm not the leader, so I have nothing to give you. You're welcome to try and take it."

Katsuragi shifed uncomfortably, probably not happy with how the situation had turned out, but Ryuuen had a wolfish look in his eyes, eyeing down a fight about to happen. There was an intense glare, as if he was enjoying the anticipation on a whole new level. It was scary, but not as scary as Ayanokouji.

His eyes were empty, dark voids full of nothingness. They seemed to eat up my very being, looking into my soul and finding it pathetically dull. Along with his apathetic face, showing nothing like usual, his relaxed stance and his casual threats of violence, I had never seen anything as terrifying in my life.

But that wouldn't stop me from beating him. Often in a fight, it came to whoever had the most willpower, and I was sure that I could hold out against someone willing to be bought that easily.

"Fine."

He answered my challenge in a nonchalant manner, as if he didn't even consider me a danger in any way whatsoever. I raised my hands and got into a fighting stance, ready to take on whatever he threw at me.

Pain.

Stars flashed before my eyes, and everything hurt. In an instant I was knocked backwards with incredible force, barely able to keep myself upright, desperately wiping the tears out of my eyes in order to regain any vision.

Ayanokouji moved towards me, slowly without any cause to hurry. The most terrifying thing was his face hadn't changed. I hadn't heard any exertion of effort, I hadn't even seen him move,

and such a powerful strike seemed common to him.

What the hell was he?

Pain.

Once again, I was hit. Once again, I hadn't even seen him move. I felt blood in my mouth, choaked up through my throat, and an unbearable pain in my chest from where he'd hit me gain. Two hits, and I could already barely stand.

"You're pathetic Horikita. I gave you everything and this is what it comes to."

Pain.

"A cowering girl trying to run away."

Pain.

I could feel my ankle had given out. Running was no longer an option.

"I gave you respect in the class by saving Sudou."

Pain.

"I gave you a loyal follower to help your actions."

Pain.

"I gave you a chance to be leader of the class. And you ignored all of these."

Pain.

"It's pathetic. You believe yourself superior, and yet you fail so easily. It's good that you aren't the leader. If we had to rely on you, there'd be no hope of victory."

Pain.

I curled up on the ground, trying my best to get through his blows, physical and verbal. Everything hurt, my entire body was on fire. Each of his sledgehammer blows had been driven into me, and while none of them had hit any vital parts, or broken any bones, I would be hobbling around for days or weeks.

The psychological blows would take a while to recover from.

I waited a moment, but no more blows were forthcoming. In my dazed state, I could feel someone feeling around in my pockets. I tried to brush them off, but there was no strength left in my arms. I felt the keycard being taken from my body, failing the one and only job I had been given in this exam.

It was difficult, but I managed to turn my body and open one of my eyes enough to see what was happening.

Ayanokouji had made his way over to to Ryuuen and Katsuragi, holding the key card in his hand. Ignoring the ringing in my ears, I strained them and just managed to catch the conversation.

"Was that necessary, Ayanokouji? It seemed cruelly brutal." At least Katsuragi had some sense of justice, not that I cared for his opinion.

"Who cares, it was incredible. I never expected you to be such a brutal fighter, monster. Maybe one day we can go a few rounds."

"Don't get ahead of yourself Ryuuen. You'd be better off challenging everyone else first, before you have a chance against me."

"Kukuku you cocky bastard, don't count me out just yet. Now hand over the key card."

"After you two sign this contract." He pulled a folded piece of paper and a pen out of his pocket, the final proof that he was betraying the class.

"You don't trust me huh?"

"Would you?"

Ryuuen laughed, before signing the paper, with Katsuragi also doing so as witness to their deal. I had no idea what it was, but Ayanokouji and Ryuuen had made good on their agreement.

"Now, the key card?"

I watched, helpless, as Ayanokouji passed over the key card with my name to Ryuuen, who after looking for a moment passed it to Katsuragi. He, however, took a long look at it, before handing it back to Ayanokouji.

"So, who's the leader for Class B?" Ayanokouji's question surprised me. If he really had sold out the class, why would he care who Class B's leader was? I couldn't follow his logic at all.

"Chihiro Shirinami. Here, Kaneda got a photo of her leader's card. A much more boring method than yours, Ayanokouji."

"Alright then. It seems our business is concluded. If this is the way the two of you handle things, then I hope I never have to make a deal with you again."

Katsuragi left the clearing, moving back in the direction of Class A's campsite.

"Kukuku he doesn't even realise how fucked he is."

"I've got some of his classmates who're going to vote incorrectly. Class A is going to get nothing."

"You really did plan for everything didn't you. Well, I guess this is your victory. Next time, I'll crush you."

Ryuuen followed Katsuragi, leaving the clearing behind. Only Ayanokouji and I now remained, and as he turned to face me I felt the cold fear return to my body, as well as acceptance of my defeat.

"Ayanokouji... why?"

He knelt down in front of me, resting a hand almost tenderly on my face. Even if I wanted to, there was nothing I could do to brush it off. My arms weren't working properly, and given a few minutes they'd probably be better, right now I was helpless, completely defeated.

"There are two things you should know about me, Horikita. I already told you one of them. Do you remember?"

"Not... to trust... you."

It was painful to get the words out, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of breaking me completely.

"Yes. And the other is the most important." He lent forward, looking directly into my eyes with his dark empty voids. "I will always win, no matter the cost. I will win this exam; I promise you that. So, thank you, for being the sacrifice needed to do so."

And then the hand that had been tenderly holding my head up, slammed it down onto the ground, and I saw nothing more.

Authors Notes:

Aight, so late chapter again because I was watching something. Just finished Dr Strangelove. Actually an epic movie, can't believe it took me so long to get around to this.

Chapter from Horikita PoV. It was interesting to write, and I spent a bit of time trying to figure out what Horikita would be thinking. I feel like I got it pretty accurate.

To any Horikita lovers, I'm sorry, but this was just too satisfying. Later on in the novels she gets to be a pretty good character, but from about 2-7 she's pretty obnoxious. I dunno, not taking my hate out on her like with Sakura, but this was the natural progression of the story, even if it was kinda fun to write.

Not much to say, but along with Ayanokouji selling the exams, this was one of the original concepts. It's changed quite a lot since I first thought of it, but the idea's remained the same.

Anyways, thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 10 - Completing the Puzzle

I looked down at the body of Horikita. She was out cold, and probably would be for a few hours after the blows I'd given her. I'd taken care not to hit her in any way that would be obvious and made sure there wouldn't be any lasting injuries. If the school did a proper check-up, as they should when I bring them a second student with a head injury, all they should find was a blow to the temple, and nothing more.

I sighed. It was cruel what I had done to her. It would have been far easier to simply steal the card, or to take her down instantly, but unfortunately, they weren't options. Kikyou was expecting me to target Horikita somehow, and this was an effective method of doing so. I was confident she would approve of my actions here.

The other benefit was that I still had a use for Horikita, and this was a way to break her out of her shell. I still thought she had potential, if only she could break out of her isolationist shell. This was my final wake up call to her. Demonstrating the difference between us would hopefully trigger her competitive nature, while also making her aware of all the mistakes she had made. I needed her to take up the mantle of leader, but if this didn't work then nothing would.

I raised my head, looking over to the bushes where the third observer had been hiding.

"You can come out now."

Kikyou made her way out of the jungle and into the clearing, a psychotic grin on her face, although I could see in her eyes a hint of fear. Interesting. It seemed my actions may have been too much for her, even when I was targeting her greatest danger. Perhaps I had overstated how much she hated everyone, at least to the point of brutalising them. She seemed to have a little sympathy for Sakura even, so I would have to recalculate how much I could get away with before driving Kikyou away.

"I assume you're satisfied?"

"Oh, you definitely came through. You fucked the bitch right up!"

I looked closely at Kikyou, trying to analyse her emotional state based on her body, but it was for naught. The hidden fear I'd seen in her eyes had been quickly swallowed up behind her façade, or perhaps she had gotten over it now that our fight had ended. There

was no way to know for sure.

That aside, I still had to deal with winning the exam. We weren't in the clear yet, as if I gave up now our class would probably dead last, so even if I didn't bother to do any of the other steps, I still had to deal with Horikita.

I knelt down and hoisted her onto my shoulder, before standing again and making my way along the path in the direction of the boat.

"We still have things to do, and I'll need you with me. Come on."

Kikyou moved to follow me, matching me by my side, but giving an inquisitive look towards my actions.

"What're we doing now? Can't we just leave Horikita where she was?"

I could see small bags beneath Kikyou's crimson eyes, detracting slightly from her cute face. She was also moving with sluggish actions, and her mind didn't seem to be running as fast as normal. If she had been operating at top performance, this would seem like an obvious move, even if she didn't figure out the added benefits, but currently she couldn't. The stifled yawn she gave was the final piece of evidence.

Kikyou was tired.

It was late at night, as my watch informed me we had just missed midnight, but even so I'd seen her stay awake for much longer periods of time back at school. No, this week had been incredibly draining on her, and I wasn't doing her any favours by keeping her up any longer.

"I know you're tired, so I won't explain too much. But if we left her behind, injured as she was, it would be incredibly suspicious. I wouldn't count out Horikita informing a teacher of what I did, and while there isn't any evidence, Ryuuen would probably corroborate the story in order to get me punished."

"So you're going to retire her yourself, and make yourself out as the knight in shining armor?"

"Basically."

Her face soured as I agreed with her metaphor, although I couldn't figure out why. Perhaps she was upset at me being Horikita's knight instead of hers, although after what I had done to the poor girl, there was no sane person who would think I was on her side.

The rest of the walk passed in silence, with Kikyou following my footsteps as we made out way out of the jungle. I had mapped this path several times over in my mind, and ensured that nothing unexpected would happen, like getting lost and falling down a cliff. Really, I would never be so unprepared as for such a thing to

happen.

It was all the more special then when in silence the jungle suddenly parted, and we made our way onto the beach. Luckily the weather had held, with clear skies for the entire exam, and Kikyou and I both stopped simultaneously, in awe of the sight before us.

"Beautiful..."

I wholeheartedly agreed with her sentiment. So far on this exam, I hadn't been out to the beach, or out of the jungle at night, and I didn't think Kikyou had either. We had seen glimpses through the trees, and the clearing where our class was camping gave hints away, but nothing matched up to how it looked right now.

A starry expanse filled the sky, stretching as far as the eye could see. Glittering gems dotted the sky, too numerous to count. The Milky Way spread across the centre, a magnificent band of light spread out across the darkness above. It was a sight beyond description.

Never in the White Room had I had a chance to go outside, let alone see the night sky. Once I was out, and staying with Matsuo, one of the first things I did was spend the night outside and look at the lights shining down from above. There were many nights I spent back at school on the dorm roof absorbed by the twinkling stars shining down on us.

But nothing compared to this.

Away from Tokyo's intense light pollution, in the middle of the ocean without a cloud or light in sight, the sky opened in a way neither of us had ever seen.

It was magnificent.

I don't know how long we stood there, distracted by the light, but at some point, Kikyou's hand had found mine, and we stood there together, amazed, awestruck, by the indescribable sight above us.

Eventually, unfortunately, my neck got sore from looking up, and I could feel the weight on my shoulder from Horikita's listless body. It was an upsetting reminder that we couldn't stay here forever.

Perhaps, if I hadn't chosen this path, I could have. If I hadn't decided to insert myself into the chaos of school, to have fun and challenge everyone I could, then perhaps I could have stayed here longer.

But I had made my choice. I had chosen my path, I had put myself into this situation, and now I was reaping the results.

So be it.

Hand in hand, I moved with Kikyou towards the boat, ready to set the final piece of plan into motion, the night sky glittering above us in all its beauty.

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We reached the boat ramp, where Chabashira and one of the test supervisors was waiting for us.

"What happened."

It seemed there wasn't going to be any friendly banter. Understandable, since as a teacher her first priority was to her students.

"We were trying to sneak around the island and spy on the other camps. Horikita tripped and hit her head on a rock."

The supervisor brought out a stretcher, and I quickly laid Horikita down on it, grateful for the weight off my shoulder. She wasn't that heavy, but it was an awkward way to carry a person, especially for the three quarters of an hour it took to get here. The night sky was really distracting.

After giving her a quick check-up, it was clear that the only injury visible was the wound on her temple.

"She'll have to retire, right? I don't see how she could participate in this condition."

Chabashira turned sharply to me when I said that but didn't dare reject the notion. It was far too late for her to back out of my plan now, and the only option she had was to trust me.

"You understand the consequences for that, don't you? Your class will lose 30 points. Will Horikita be all right with retiring?"

"I understand, and yes absolutely she will. I do have one concern, however. Kikyou, Horikita's our leader, right? So, what happens now that we don't have a leader?"

Once again, I had the opportunity to test her. It was never pointless to pose a question to her, as every test was a chance to improve her thinking in some way. However, in her current tired state I didn't expect much.

"The rules said that we needed a leader to have a spot. But we can't change leaders I thought?"

It seemed my hunch was correct. It was too much to ask of her to be awake for 18 hours putting out fires and then figure out loopholes that were designed to be obscure.

"We can't change leaders without a valid reason, was the full rule. The retirement of a leader through injury is a valid reason, so I'd like to change the Class D leader."

I targeted the last part towards the independent supervisor, who drew in a breath at my question. Chabashira's head was swivelling between the two of us, trying to figure out what was going on. Clearly, the teachers hadn't been informed on this, lest they leak it to their class. This was probably the first she'd ever heard of it.

"Yes, it's possible, although I hadn't expected you to figure it out. The only person to ever do so was the Student Council President

Manabu two years ago. I must say I'm impressed."

"It's a simple deduction to make if you pay attention."

"Hardly." The examiner gave me a disappointed look, as if upset by my modesty. Really, it was a simple deduction. Most of the grade was simply not clever enough to spot it. I'm sure Sakayanagi would have been able to figure it out. What surprised me the most was that Nagumo hadn't? That said a lot about his true potential, despite what his propaganda machine put out.

"So that's why you told every other class our leader!" Kikyou was quick to catch on to my plan. Unfortunately, that was the wrong thing to say. It made Horikita's retirement by injury much more suspicious, especially if she confessed.

"Yes, I had intended to make Horikita retire anyway. Unfortunately, she got injured by accident, while I was planning on having her fake a stomach-ache." I'm sure they wouldn't have believed a fake stomach-ache, but I had to cover for Kikyou's mistake. It was strange to see her make one, especially in a conversation. It really wasn't like her. "I'd like to change our leader."

Chabashira looked at the supervisor, who shrugged, before pulling out a new key card and attaching a label to it.

"Do you have Horikita's old card? We need to collect that."

"Unfortunately, she must have dropped it somewhere, or it got lost while I was carrying her. I have no idea where it is."

In fact, the card was sitting in my pocket. They obviously wanted to collect it to prevent confusion, but I still needed it for exactly that reason.

"Unfortunate. Well in that case, I'll take the poor girl to the infirmary. Chabashira-sensei, ensure these two leave the beach safely please."

"Wait, I have another question."

The supervisor stopped, only having gotten a few meters away before I called out to them.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Hypothetically, if I had purchased something with points, perhaps let's say a hammock, would I be allowed to keep it after the exam was over?"

"Seriously?" I got an elbow in the side from Kikyou, not finding my question very appropriate for the moment.

The supervisor seemed to be in a similar state, pinching the brow of their nose after hearing what I asked.

"Yes, fine, you can keep it. Was that really what you wanted to know?"

"Yes, it was."

With visible frustration on their face, the supervisor wheeled

Horikita up the boat ramp and disappeared onto the deck of the boat, leaving Kikyou and I alone with Chabashira.

"If you want to win this exam, ensure that Horikita stays quiet and understands that if she speaks out about what happened, it would damage the class." Even if she held a grudge against me, I trusted that Horikita's desire to reach Class A was greater than that and wouldn't sabotage the class to get me in trouble.

"What did happen then, Ayanokouji?"

"What are you willing to do to reach Class A?"

I answered her question with a question. We stared at each other for a moment before she backed down and looked away.

"I'll follow your request, Ayanokouji. Just remember, I can't always protect you."

"Duly noted. Now, you have a ward to oversee."

With my dismissal, Chabashira turned and followed the same path the supervisor had moments ago, leaving me alone with Kikyou on the beach.

"What was that about, Kiyotaka?"

"You should forget that conversation ever happened. There are things you shouldn't get involved in if you want to stay out of trouble." If this was exposed, both Chabashira and I would go down from violating numerous rules. I wanted to keep Kikyou out of that as much as possible.

She had a guarded look on her face, probably making the same calculations and reaching the same understanding of the risks in the deal I had that I had also made, and realised it was in her best interests to stay out.

"I understand. Anyway—"

Before she could finish, a huge yawn burst out of her unmolested, interrupting whatever she was going to say.

"Let's get you back to camp. You need some rest for tomorrow."

"Fine, fine, but only if you carry me."

I paused. That was unexpected.

"Excuse me?"

Kikyou huffed. "Hmph. You carried Horikita around, now it's my turn."

I stared at her in bafflement.

"She had a head injury." I got a finger jabbed into my chest in response.

"Not good enough. You carried her, now you carry me. I'm tired, and you've kept me up late."

I sighed. This was more work than I had expected, but if it shut it up, I had no problems carrying her. Besides, it was a prime opportunity to tease her.

"Fine."

Saying that, I reached down and before she could react, I picked her up in a princess hold, clutching her close to my chest.

"Eep!" It seemed she hadn't been expecting that. Perfect. By the light of the stars above us, I could see a tinge of red on her cheeks.

"What's wrong? You asked me to carry you."

"Not like that! I meant—

"So, you want me to put you down?"

"Yes! No! Shut up! I hate you, you bastard. You just wanted to hug me again!"

I sighed again and began moving back towards the campsite with Kikyou clutched in my arms and chest, ignoring her weak protests.

"Just relax. It's late, and you're tired. I'll get you back to camp."

In response to my platitudes, the complaints finally ceased, and unexpectedly Kikyou curled up a little, hugging into my chest as best she could.

"I suppose it's fine for this one time. Don't forget you're buying me lunch."

"I'll buy you an extra expensive one, don't worry."

And we continued on like that, with soft conversation as I made my way through the island jungle towards the Class D camp.

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The time was five in the morning. I had dropped Kikyou off at the campsite the previous night and given her my final instructions for what to do today. It was the last day of the exam, and I only had a couple of hours and only a couple of tasks left.

Which was why I was currently outside the Class A campsite, wrapped in my hammock, waiting for one blonde traitor.

So it was to my surprise, when I saw Hashimoto approaching me being followed by a grouchy-looking Kamuro.

"Morning boss!" It seemed despite the early morning Hashimoto didn't lose his cheerful personality. Of course, that just made me trust him even less. He wasn't in Class A for nothing, and I believed in his sincerity just as much as I believed that Ike would stop being a pervert.

"I'm surprised to see you up Kamuro. I remember asking only for Hashimoto."

She gave me a glare, the tired in her eyes still very visible. It seemed she hadn't woken up as well as Hashimoto.

"The loli told me to keep an eye on Hashimoto too, not just you."

A hurt look was assumed on Hashimoto's face at Kamuro's confession. Outwardly, at least, he was a fervent follower of Skayanagi, even more than Kamuro who I suspect was being blackmailed.

"The princess doesn't trust me? I'm crushed."

Actually, he didn't seem that disappointed, more expecting that to be the outcome.

"Forgetting the for the moment, I need you to submit the names of leaders."

They both looked at me in confusion. Obviously, they hadn't thought through the situation properly, since this really was an obvious method to bring down the class. I shouldn't have even needed to interfere, but it seemed Sakayanagi had chosen inefficient pawns.

"Wait, but Katsuragi's the one who'll be submitting the names."

"It never said in the rules who had to submit them, or that they were locked in. Just wait until he's finished, then change the names for Class B and C to 'Ichinose Honami' and 'Ibuki Mio'."

It was easy to figure out who was a safe bet to not be leader in Class B. Ichinose would never have been chosen, as that's too obvious, and would take up too much of her time. Picking her name was a guaranteed loss of 50 points.

The difficulty came from Class C. Katsuragi had probably put down Ryuuen's name, knowing that he was one of the only people on the island from Class C, making him the most likely suspect. I couldn't let Katsuragi guess the leader of Class C correctly, or he would gain too many points. Of course, Ryuuen could have changed the leader, and kept someone hidden in reserve on the island. In any case, the only person I knew for sure had retired was Ibuki, hence she was the only person I was certain wasn't the leader.

"Alright, it's an easy enough plan. But what about Class D?"

"I've leaked to him the wrong leader. That guess is already false."

That was it. As long as Hashimoto followed my instructions, and wasn't caught by Katsuragi, Class A was going to lose quite a few points. Could I trust him? No. Could I trust him with this, following both Sakayanagi and my orders right now? Yes.

"Great, now we know what to do. Can I go back to bed?" Kamuro really didn't care about much. She had probably been enjoying a week away from her master, and this reminder that she'd been loaned out to me was not something she was enjoying.

"Convey my thanks to Sakayanagi. I'll give her a challenge soon enough."

"Oh, she'll be super happy to hear that boss! You're like the only thing she ever talks about in an excited manner"

"It's really creepy. She gets this look in her eyes, and her laugh is super weird."

"Right..."

It seemed Sakayanagi had even more of a strange fascination with

me than I had accounted for. In hindsight, it probably hadn't been a good idea to get in her debt by using her pawns.

"I'll be off then. I have more things to do."

I received a blinding grin in response from Hashimoto, and another look of disgust from Kamuro.

"Good luck, boss. You really are incredible." There was a suspicious glint in Hashimoto's eyes, and I couldn't figure out what was interesting him so much. He wasn't going to betray me, of that I was confident, but he was planning something, and it had to do with his cooperation with me.

I guess I'll just have to sever ties with him.

With my machinations completed with the moles in Class A, I left their camp, leaving Hashimoto to do his job and Kamuro to get some more sleep, not that it would help her personality, I suspected.

I, however, continued on and made my way over to the Class B campsite for one final conversation.

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"What do you want Ayanokouji?"

It had been easy enough to call over Kanzaki. It seemed they had placed guards around the campsite day and night, specifically to watch for me. I was detected rather quickly, since I wasn't trying to hide, but luckily Shibata, who was the one to catch me, was willing enough to fetch Kanzaki when I mentioned I wanted to make a deal.

It seemed there was a growing schism in Class B, between those who wanted to make moves, and those who followed Ichinose and prioritised stability and relationships. I was very interested in how the class would evolve after this exam.

"I have an offer for you."

"And why should I trust a single word you say? You made it very clear that we're enemies."

"Because every other class knows your leader is Shiranami Chihiro."

He froze at my words, only for a second, but enough to confirm that it was true. His eyes darted frantically, analysing every single part of me, trying to notice any slight or tell that I was bluffing, that I had something else up my sleeve.

I'm sorry Kanzaki, but you aren't capable of reading me.

"I see. And if I told you that she wasn't our leader?"

"Class A, C and D will be putting her name down anyway."

I could see a slight slump in his shoulders as he fully realised the situation he was in. For all intents and purposes, Class B was doomed. The previous tense energy seemed to leave him, as he gave up on the last amount of effort left in him.

"I guess that's it then. Are you here to gloat?"

"Hardly. Like I said, I have an offer."

The trick would be convincing him to take the deal.

"An offer?"

A cautious light had returned to Kanzaki's eyes as I offered him a potential lifeline. The situation couldn't get much worse, unless someone in his class took a risk. Double or nothing, if you will. Currently, since their leader was going to be guessed they stood to lose 50 points. That was unavoidable, at least to him, and I wasn't going to change that.

"I'm willing to give you the leaders of Class A, C and D."

His eyes widened at that, and he took a short sharp breath at the ludicrous statement I proposed.

"And why should I believe you? You would be betraying your own class."

"Because I don't want to see Class B fall this early. As it stands, every other class will come out on top, and Class B will fall behind, simply because of having cautious and naïve leader. Tell me, Kanzaki. Are you like Ichinose, or are you willing to take a chance, like you did with the exams?"

He folded his arms, and tilted his head forward, considering the situation. It was a bold move he could make, going behind Ichinose's back, in an attempt to salvage the exam, but it could also backfire incredibly badly. His decision here could determine the fate of Class B for the next three years.

Finally, he looked up from his thinking, and asked me one last question. It was a valid one, and more than any other the most important factor in this situation.

"Why are you doing this? And no bullshit this time."

"Because it's fun." There was nothing more to say. I had no interest in the class competition if it was a boring one-sided annihilation, but if every class was involved, fracturing at the seams, well that was a competition worth participating in.

"What a stupid reason. Very well, I'm willing to take this risk, as long as you have evidence."

I pulled the key card out of my pocket that I'd saved for this very moment. I handed the key card to Kanzaki as I named the three of them, and he looked it over making sure it was genuine.

"I thought he would have retired with the rest of Cass C by now. I haven't seen him in days."

"In actuality, he remained on the island. Ryuuen was communicating with Kaneda. You never should have let him into your camp. That's how I found out who your leader was."

I saw his fist tighten around the key card, frustration in his eyes

as I revealed this fact. Apparently, Kaneda staying at the camp had been a sore point for him.

"I warned her about this..."

The only her I could imagine him talking about was Ichinose. Obviously, she wanted to let Kaneda stay, while Kanzaki was naturally suspicious, but Ichinose had won out. Just like with the idea to vote for leaders, Kanzaki had been all for it, but Ichinose had chosen to play the safe game. I could see this situation tending towards one similar to Class A's, but with a much bigger divide between the leaders. It seemed I had fractured the class.

"This is your moment, Kanzaki. Will you trust me or trust your classmate? If you follow my plan, I guarantee you will finish this exam as Class A."

I had calculated the points in my head that each class should get by the end of the exam, if things went exactly as I expected. And once all was said and done, Class B would overtake Class A.

"I'll leave you to think about it."

I turned and left the violet-haired leader to his thoughts. It was a big gamble. I was from another class and offering him points was incredibly suspect. But I also had brought irrefutable proof of who our leader was, so trusting me wasn't completely off the table.

In the end, though, his decision would only affect his own class. I was already guessing the leaders of the other classes, meaning they would lose 50 points, and either Class B gained, lost or didn't change their points. No one else would be affected by the outcome.

Everything was on Kanzaki's shoulders right now. Both options could be seen as prioritizing the class, either by gaining points for them, or not causing a rift.

And if he did go behind Ichinose's back, then a rift was inevitable. I had engineered the situation so that his actions would be revealed, and the two leaders would be at odds with each other. Except one of them had saved them from a complete loss, and the other had allowed the loss to almost happen. It was clear who would be favoured.

Kanzaki had to choose, between his classes victory, and his classes unity with Ichinose.

In the end, I would be satisfied with both options. Someone would fall, and someone would rise, and I would be the final victor.

Authors Notes:

So, it apparently turned into a romance at one point, looking at the stars. That wasn't intentional, although I really liked it, but really i was just trying to describe the stars. I used to live in the middle of buttfuck nowhere, and since i moved to the city years ago

I've only had a few chances to go back or to camp anywhere just as deserted. I've always missed the night sky. It's one of the things i love to just look at most in the world, especially in the middle of nowhere.

Thats the reason i changed the weather from the book, thats literally the only reason.

I have no idea how to write Hashimoto. I cannot nail that guy, and he really doesn't have enough time in the novel to get a good idea. I've also been reading too many fanfics and it's influenced my opinion of him.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 11 - The Reveal

I woke from my rest to hear someone approaching me. I wasn't sleeping, but since I didn't get a chance to sleep last night, I had taken the opportunity to setup my hammock just inside the jungle from the beach and simply lie down for a bit. From where I was, it was unlikely that anyone would show up and find me by accident, but I could also see the boat and would be aware when all the classes made their way down to the beach for the end of the exam.

Which is why it was such a surprise to hear footsteps approaching me.

"It seems you're the only one who knows how to properly have a vacation, Ayanokouji."

Ah. It was Ryuuen. Glancing at my watch, it was almost twelve already, and the classes should be on their way down to the beach now.

"I thought your class did a pretty good job. That was the point of this exam after all."

"Kukuku, don't give me that bullshit. All they know is how to waste points on things they don't need. I bet most of them didn't even enjoy being here, despite having a fucking jet-ski."

He had a point. From what I'd seen, Class C had been having a glorious time on the first few days, enjoying every luxury they could with the points available. But I suspected those were all short-term gratifiers. Ryuuen seemed to understand the way I thought: to enjoy a vacation was to relax, and what better way than to sleep in a hammock by the beach all day.

The real question was why he had approached me. Probably to gloat, thinking he had won, despite me interfering with his plans, but also for my help.

Ryuuen was an entertainer, after all. It was a crucial part in crushing your opponent.

"I assume you're planning your entrance for once everyone else is on the beach?" I cracked an eyelid at this and saw his face leering down at me as I lay here, unprotected and vulnerable. Unfortunately, he would probably be careful about looking for a fight after the brutality I put Horikita through.

"Of course! After all, no one will expect my grand return. Ichinose'll probably shit herself!" He laughed again, imagining the

fear he would be putting into the heart of the other classes, realising they had been played. I wondered how long that confidence would last.

"I wouldn't be so confident. You realise every class has put your name down as leader, right?"

"Every class? Does that mean you blabbed to Kanzaki?" He gave me a searching look, although the grin never left his face.

"Of course I did. It wouldn't be fun if Class B was left clueless, woud it?"

"Kukuku finally, someone who understands! It's all about the game, the battle to fight and crush your opponent. To not even hesitate to give your opponent an advantage, every time we talk you get better and better, Ayanokouji!"

He was enamoured with me, it seemed, or at least with the idea that I thought in a similar way to him. Someone ruthless, willing to do whatever it takes to win, even beating down on my own classmates, seemed to be a joy to him. Perhaps he'd never faced someone like that before.

Unfortunately, Ryuuen, I'm far beyond your level.

"You don't seem all that concerned."

"You've already guessed me as leader. Kanzaki doing so doesn't hurt me at all, it only helps him."

So Ryuuen, too, had figured out Kanzaki was the weak point of Class B. Despite seeming to be their strength as a strategist and someone willing to take risks, if they all were united with Ichinose, they probably wouldn't face as many problems, or be as easy to exploit.

"I suppose that's true."

As we were speaking, four groups of students had moved down to the beach, sitting in chairs they had been provided with. Noticeably, two of the groups were half of the size of the others, along with being separated by gender.

Class D had been incapable of overcoming the underwear incident.

"Wait... did they actually... kukuku this can't be real! How much did they fuck up to completely split? It was only seven days what the fuck could possibly have happened?!"

"Someone stole a girls underwear."

Ryuuen's eyes widened even further, before collapsing against a tree nearby.

"This can't be true. That's fucking ridiculous, no wonder the school labelled you defects. It's incredible. How is your class so pathetic!" His eyes narrowed again; all previous mirth suddenly gone. "And how did a monster end up with the likes of them?"

I didn't deign that question with a response. Ryuuen didn't need to know my life story, nor was I going to tell him my defect. It would only help him to know.

"Oh boo hoo, I'm getting the silent treatment. Anyway, either hurry up or get left behind, I'm done with living in filth."

Ryuuen moved to leave, and so I quickly climbed out of my hammock and wrapped it around myself, before joining him moving towards the beach.

"Wait... Ryuuen?"

"And Ayanokouji too?"

"I thought they retired?"

"Hey, is Ayanokouji betraying us?"

Ryuuen snickered at the last question, knowing the answer, but we ignored all the questions and made our way over to the table with the leaders. Luckily, they all seemed to have conglomerated together in the centre, whether to talk about the exam or just as a natural pattern I wasn't sure.

We took the two empty seats left at the table, which consisted of Katsuragi, Ichinose, Kanzaki and surprisingly enough Kikyou. I would have thought she was off being the nicest person ever again, now that the time for a leader was over, but it seemed she had joined the leaders for now.

"Ryuuen, Ayanokouji. I saved you both a seat. I wanted to get all the leaders together for the announcement." Ah, so it was Katsuragi's doing. Obviously, since the school was most likely only going to announce the final scores, it was in our best interests to talk it over with the other classes and figure out how those scores came to be.

I took a seat next to Kikyou, with Ryuuen sitting on my other side.

"How did you know they were both still here, Katsuragi-kun? I heard both of them retired, even from Kushida-san." Ichinose was the only one out of the loop.

"Kukuku, poor Ichinose has no fucking idea what's going on."

She gave him a look of confusion and hurt at his rather cruel statement. It wasn't her fault that none of us considered working with her, she was simply too difficult to manipulate in her current state.

As we had spoken, all the classes had formed behind their respective leaders, apart from Ryuuen who had no one on the beach with him. It was an incredible sight, like four armies signing a negotiation.

"Anyway, where's Suzune? You change leaders after she retired Ayanokouji?" There it was, Ryuuen took his chance to flex his

superiority in the exam.

"Of course, I did. It's a shame there was no one left from your class to change leaders with."

"Kukuku, I really didn't plan that well did I."

Separate from our back and forth, Kanzaki and Katsuragi were both staring at us with horrified looks on their faces.

"What... what are you talking about?"

"You changed your leader Ayanokouji?"

I turned to them, ready to crush them both, and fracture Class B. This conversation would define the next three years of cooperation and functionality of our classes.

"Of course, I did. Every other class put down Horikita, so it was part of her plan to change our leader."

I could hear muttering behind me from Class D, but I ignored it for now. Kikyou would be the one to deal with that, but hopefully they could get it in their heads that Horikita came up with them plan.

"Kukuku you're an idiot if you named leaders of other classes from the word of an enemy Kanzaki." The deadly gaze from Kanzaki shifted from me to Ryuuen, who took it head on, cackling away at the failings of his opponents.

"Kanzaki-kun... did you go behind my back and name leaders? We agreed we wouldn't."

"Yes, I did, Ichinose-san. Every other class knew who our leader was. Because of your naïve thinking you let Kaneda into our camp, and we were going to lose the exam. I had to take a risk."

Ichinose looked as if she had been struck. Betrayed by her co-leader, who had risked it all because of her mistake. Arguments had begun to start up behind them now, their class debating, yelling even, about who was right.

"Kiyotaka-kun, it seems that the Class B unity has broken."

"Yes, to think that even their leaders can't work together, it's pitiful."

Ignoring the bickering coming from behind Class B, Katsuragi directed a question at me.

"Ayanokouji, you said a leader could be changed?"

"Kukuku, obviously, baldy. If you read the rules properly and figured it out, it wouldn't have mattered that we found out the green idiot was your leader on day one."

Technically, it wasn't we, it was me, but I was willing to let Ryuuen have this one. Behind Katsuragi, there was an obvious divide, between students looking crushed, and students trying not to laugh. Obviously, the latter were Sakayanagi supporters, and were happy to see him fall, with Hashimoto in the forefront.

"Hey, Katsuragi, is that true? Did you lose the exam on the first day?"

I saw Katsuragi's fists clench on the table, frustrated that it was true, and his plan to get back points by making a deal with Ryuuen was worthless.

"Wait, does that mean you weren't lying then, Ayanokouji?"

"I told you, didn't I? At the end of this exam, you'll be Class A if you chose me over Ichinose."

That last part hadn't been said, but I'd heavily implied it in my conversation with him. Me or Ichinose, Class A or Class B. And he'd chosen to take the risk, as I'd hoped.

"Kanzaki-kun..."

The discontent within Class B was growing stronger and stronger, as more and more people took sides in the debate. There was now a clear divide between people who supported Ichinose and people who supported Kanzaki. Much like Class D, the class was split boys vs girls, although there were a few outliers. I suspect, especially amongst the girls, if you disagreed with the fairy tale kindness way of life, it would be intolerable to live under Ichinose. It would be crushing, to see chance after chance go to waste, because of the power of friendship, while being unable to disagree. The potential for Kanzaki to take over completely was now there.

"Just out of curiosity, who'd you put down for the Class D leader Ryuuen?"

"No one. What, you think I'm stupid enough to risk losing points on a guess? The obvious answer is you, but I'm sure you planned for that too, you fucking monster."

I had in fact taken efforts to make sure I wasn't leader. In actuality, the real leader was Kikyou. It was a surprise, though, that Ryuuen had been reserved enough to not risk putting down a leader, even though I was the obvious candidate to be replace Horikita. I had to commend that decision.

Just then, we heard the click of a megaphone being turned on. Mashima appeared on the beach. The first-year students hurriedly tried to form a line, but Mashima waved his hands at them to stop.

"It's fine. We don't mind if you want to keep relaxing. The test has already concluded. Now we've entered the summer vacation part of the trip, so it's all right if you loosen up."

Even though he'd said that tensions were naturally running high for the students, and the discord in all the classes was still around. They all stopped their arguments in an instant.

"Over this past week, we, your teachers, have closely watched your efforts in this special test. There were some students who took on the challenge honestly, head-on. There were some who devised

schemes to tackle the test. Many things have happened, but overall, the test results were splendid. Good work."

"Well then, to get straight to the point. I would like to announce the results of the special test."

There probably wasn't a single person, not even our own homeroom teacher, who had seen these test results.

"We will not accept any questions regarding the results, no exceptions. We would like you to accept the results you have been given, analyse them, and use them to help you for the next test. It is what it is. Don't wet yourselves over these results. You must accept reality, you know?"

"That's what we should be saying to you Class C people. You used up all of your points, right? Don't make us laugh." Sudou poked fun at Class C's reckless behaviour.

Ryuuen simply grinned back at him, comfortably leaning back in his beach chair, an air of confident victory surrounding him.

How my classmates, and most of the students surrounding the leaders table still think the results are based on the original 300 points I couldn't understand. We had gone to great lengths discussing the exam already, and every single point of conversation was about the leaders, without a single mention of other expenditures. Why anyone would still consider them worth talking about I couldn't figure out.

"Ryuuen, before they read out the points, I want to be sure. Was Kaneda Class C's leader?" Kanzaki asked the all-important question. "I want to know if Ayanokouji was being truthful or not."

"What?" Once again, just as I had interfered with his plans before, Ryuuen looked shocked. All of his calm air evaporated instantly, and his head flicked from Kanzaki to me, figuring out the true mastermind behind his loss. "How?"

"You were far too relaxed about me finding out you were the leader. If you had planned to change your leader that would make sense, but in that case, you couldn't keep your deal with Katsuragi, and you also couldn't hide a third person on the island for the entire time since everyone else had retired already. The only other option was Kaneda, who you knew would stick around, and I found hidden in the far corner of the island asleep last night, where you thought no one would find him."

"Kukuku you're incredible! Every plan seen through, completely! I've been thoroughly defeated, absolutely this time. Amazing! It's a good thing I didn't vote for Class D leader, or I'd be left with nothing. Kukukuku"

Not once did I sense a hint of fear or frustration at his loss from Ryuuen. On the contrary, as the situation was explained, he seemed

to get more and more excited. The further he fell, the stronger his opponent was, the more he was looking forward to a fight. Ryuuen truly was an opponent I was going to enjoy facing. It seemed nothing could bring him down.

"It was all part of Horikita's plan after all."

"Sure, whatever you say, you fucking bastard. We all know who's truly in charge."

Behind me I could hear murmurs of Horikita again, my classmates discussing her plan. Perfect.

"Now we will announce the rankings. The lowest class is Class C with 50 points."

Having used all their points, voted correctly for two classes and been voted for correctly, Class C was left with 50 points. Overall, possibly still a win for Ryuuen, since his class also got a good vacation.

The students in Class D, and some from Class B and A were laughing at him for 'failing' but Ryuuen just sat there, cocky grin back on his face, overall satisfied with the end of the exam for him. It seemed he had gotten what he was really after: an opponent.

"In third place, Class A with 70 points. Coming in second is Class B with 180 points. And Class D has come first with 290 points. This concludes the announcement"

Pandemonium broke lose. I could see from where the teachers were standing interesting reactions on three of them. Mashima had a look on his face, and his movements were stiff, possibly in shock at the failure his class was. Hoshinomiya had a frown on for the first time I had ever seen, her lips pursed in frustration. Her class had done extremely well, so the only explanation was that she was upset by Class D's win. She was staring directly at me, obviously not thrown off by my mentions of Horikita, knowing exactly who was to blame for the situation.

And Chabashira had a smile. For the first time ever, a genuine happy smile was on her face. She gave me a nod well done from across the distance. For now, at least, I had secured her help and trust with evidence I could do the unthinkable, and drag Class D to Class A.

Class A and B were completely split now for opposite reasons. Katsuragi, I suspected, would never lead an exam again. He had been circled by Sakayanagi supporters who were demanding him for answers. Even of those who had previously followed him, it was only Yahiko who was making an effort to defend him.

Class B was in the opposite predicament. They were having a truly philosophical debate over whether the ends justify the means in a way that was close to delving into an all-out brawl. It seemed

to be a split between whether it was worth winning the exam if it meant backstabbing Ichinose and the agreement, they had on how to approach the exam. From what I could see, there had been a shift after the results were announced, and a majority of the class was now favouring Kanzaki, seeing that his decision had produced results for them.

Having finished my part of the events, I made my way up the ramp to the boat with Kikyou. The exam was over, and while we were free to go onto the boat, we were also free to play in the ocean, and most of Class D had chosen the latter. Almost everyone was still down on the beach, flaunting their victory in front of the other classes, despite having no idea what happened.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the demon-boy himself. I must say, I'm impressed." Kouenji was lounging on a chair on the boat, drink in hand and clad in just his speedos.

"I'm sure you could have done just as well." It wasn't a lie. When it came to Kouenji, I still hadn't had a chance to properly measure his abilities, but I suspected what I had done on the island wasn't beyond his capabilities. I hadn't had to try much after all, so even if he wasn't at my level, he could still have managed.

"Hahaha a perfect existence like myself would have done splendidly. However, I am capable of feeling some guilt for not assisting, if only because I couldn't witness your actions, so I did assist in the one way I could."

"You spoke to Horikita."

"I did. A bold plan, although rather obvious. She's agreed to keep quiet, as long as you go speak to her. You'll find her around the corner."

I would have to thank Kouenji properly later. It seemed that Chabashira hadn't been able to get to Horikita in time, but Kouenji, the ever-observant genius had deduced what had happened and interfered in order to protect me from accusations.

"Thank you for that."

Kouenji returned to drinking his mocktail, while Kikyou and I made our way over to where Horikita was sitting.

As we rounded the corner, we found the black-haired beauty laid out on a beach chair, drink in hand much like Kouenji. Unlike Kouenji, she had a furious look on her face.

"Here you are, then."

"Here I am."

She stared at me, before her eyes flickered to Kikyou, trying to figure out the relationship between us. Kikyou had been the one to call Horikita, but in the end it was I who was the trator, and as far as Horikita knew, Kikyou had gone back to camp and had no idea

what had gone down.

"What was the result of the exam?"

"Class D won with 290 points."

Her eyes widened at that, the results far exceeding what she had expected. Considering we had started with 300, and lost so many from retirement, it wasn't a surprise.

"I admit, whatever you did was impressive."

"It was all thanks to your plan. Or at least that's what the class believes."

She frowned at the notion that I was giving her the credit. I hadn't expected her to like it, though, as it was undeserved credit, something she had done nothing to earn, and would force her to take a central position in the class, unless she wanted to undermine the person who won the exam. Although that was still a possibility.

"I'll keep quiet about what happened Ayanokouji. But don't expect me to do so in the future. I won't be indulging your little fantasies any longer, and I definitely will never be trusting you again."

It seemed she had finally woken up from her isolation. It was a brutal method, but exposing weaknesses in as harsh a manner possible was always an effective way of crushing someones spirit, before building them up in a way you wanted too. In this situation I wasn't building her up, but I had broken down the last restraints Horikita had that kept her from acting in a leader-like manner. Since she would be wary about me, and I had particularly pointed out to her that she had ignored the advantages available, hopefully she would try and form some sort of group, or following at least, in the class so that they had some direction.

"How are your injuries?"

She winced a little as I asked, but from what I could see she didn't look too hurt. She was seated in a position someone severely wounded wouldn't be capable of, and I couldn't see too much evidence of medical treatment.

"I'll live. My ankle is still hard to walk on, but other than that it's not too bad."

"I'm happy to hear that! I was so worried when Kiyotaka-kun told me you'd retired."

Kikyou decided to push a little and torment Horikita some more.

"Kushida-san..."

"Yes Horikita-san?"

"... never mind."

That was interesting. Horikita had questions about Kikyou's involvement. Everything that had happened so far was confusing and shouldn't have made sense to Horikita, but her narrowing in on Kikyou was definitely something to be concerned about. As far as I

was aware, Horikita should have no idea that it was Kikyou's idea to have her beaten. I would have to be cautious when talking to Horikita about Kikyou.

"We'll leave you to your rest. I'm sure Kikyou wants to go hang out with some of her other friends in the ocean."

"Yep! I can't wait to go for a swim! I haven't had time to play this week, so it's nice to not be leader anymore!"

I gave her a nod, which she responded to with a cute smile, before dashing off to get changed into her swimwear, leaving me alone with Horikita.

There was silence as we stared at each other, me leaning against the railing of the boat, Horikita lying on the deck chair. I knew she had questions, and I had resolved myself to answer one of them, as was fair for her sacrifice.

"Why Ayanokouji? Was there no better way?"

An interesting choice. How to answer it without implicating Kikyou, that was the challenge I now had to face.

"This was the most effective method I could think of. No one would consider that I was still working for my class after beating you up and giving your name as leader away. There was not better way to allay their suspicions."

"But they all would have voted for me then. How could that have possibly helped?"

I pulled the two cards out of my pocket. Despite Kikyou being our leader at the end of the exam, she had never been in possession of the card.

"I changed the leader. Once I had convinced every class to vote for you, you were no longer the person they should have voted for."

She looked at the two cards in my hand, then looked down at her lap in resignation. I had kept Kikyou's card with me, because once I dropped her off at camp, I spent the rest of the night running around the island. There were two purposes for that. One, to claim every spot I came across. The rules stated that only the leader may use the key card, but there was no one to verify that Kikyou hadn't so I had managed to earn an additional 12 points from spots. Two, I had eventually found Kaneda curled up next to a card reader, showing that the spot had been claimed at roughly the same time I had last seen Ryuuen, confirming that Kaneda was the leader for Class C.

"I see. I hadn't even considered that as a possibility."

"Get well soon, Horikita. There's a whole class waiting for you."

I turned to leave, and made my way towards the entrance of the ship. I hadn't eaten a proper meal in a few days, having only managed to catch one fish with my hands, and was looking forward

to trying pizza for the first time.

"Wait! You haven't answered my questions yet."

"I never said I was going to. I'm not your ally, or your friend Horikita. I'm not on your side, so don't rely on me."

With that final reminder, I entered the ship to hunt down some pizza, and finally store my hammock in my room where it hopefully won't be stolen. They really are quite heavy to be wearing constantly.

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Although it wasn't very late yet, being only around 9pm, almost the entire grade had gone to bed by now. It had been a tiring week for everyone, not just the leaders, and most people were still following their camping sleep schedule, taking tonight at least to adjust to their typical high-school night owl lives.

That left just two people standing on the deck of the ship, leaning over the prow, reminiscing over the events of the past week. Once again, the stars were out, shining above the sea, as the cruise ship slowly traversed through the unseeable ocean in the dark, moving from the island on a long roundabout tour of the sea until we reached Tokyo harbor in a week's time.

Kikyou had asked to meet, and called me out here, the exact place we were standing when we first saw the deserted island. In just one week's time, there had been huge changes, shifts to the state of the grade, that would have repercussions for the next three years. How people acted, how they thought, how they perceived deals and betrayal, and how they approached exams would all be going through a radical shift. After my actions, although most had mistakenly accredited them to Horikita, no class leader could be complacent, or assume that a peaceful method was viable, as Ichinose had.

"How are you doing?"

Kikyou had been uncharacteristically quiet. Not reserved or cautious, but simply relaxing in the moment, without her usual presence being extruded around her.

"I'm tired," she admitted, "this week was a lot of work."

"I know it wasn't easy, but you did an amazing job."

She smirked at the compliment, obviously proud of how well she had managed the class, and rightfully so. I doubt there was anyone else, even Ichinose, who could have managed them so well. Part of that was Kikyou understanding the more problematic nature of humans than I believed Ichinose did, which meant she knew how to manipulate them far better than a naïve girl who wanted everyone to cooperate out of kindness. No, I didn't think that anyone was as capable of controlling a social environment as Kikyou was.

"I did, didn't I. God, I hated every moment of it, but I was fantastic. Ha, get fucked Ichinose, you bitch."

When it came to Kikyou's goal of being the nicest person, the only challenge for that was Ichinose. Really, she was her greatest rival. But after this exam, and the position I'd put her in, then the trust people had in Ichinose, at least for exams, had plummeted.

"Though I don't understand why you gave Horikita the credit. Won't that just make it harder to get rid of her?"

She wasn't wrong. I had placed Horikita in a potential position of power, although Kikyou would always be above her. But it did make it difficult to remove her, even if it came to forcing the class to choose between them.

"As fun as it would be to let the class do what they want, it's a fact that we need a leader. I'm not going to do it, because there's practically no benefit of spending time organising and helping these defectives when I could be winning the exam. I'd like to let them just exist and do what they want, but as we saw in this exam, there has to be someone to organsize them. I was hoping for Hirata to do that..."

"But I think you broke him. Hahaha, I don't think he can even function. Even some of the girls were saying they're scared of him now."

I hadn't seen the end results of my conflict with Hirata during the underwear theft, but it seemed he'd remained isolated from the class. It wasn't surprising, after what he had tried to do, but comparing him now to the boy I'd met at the start of the year, the difference was day and night. I'd seen him on the beach, sitting in a chair away from everyone else, a shell of his former self.

"How did Karuizawa react to that?"

Kikyou's face soured at the mention of her competition for the control of Class D.

"She broke up with him. Really, I don't get why you're paying so much attention to her."

"It's just a hunch about something." That didn't seem to convince her, but she let it go for now. "As for the leader, you did a great job, but I can't ask you to do that again."

She perked up at my words, when I said she wouldn't have to be a leader again. It went against everything she was trying to do, and while it had worked out this time, that was due to my careful manipulation of her perception from both the boys and girls side, and the clear division in conflicts. In the future, it wouldn't be easy for Kikyou to be nice to everyone, to be the friend of the class, our own angel, and still remain leader.

She moved next to me slightly, until our arms were brushing,

before leaving her bead on my shoulder. Once again, we were alone, watching the night sky spread out above us.

"Thanks. If you need me to be leader, I can, but really, I fucking hated it. If there's any other way do that. God, it was terrible."

She was playing it down slightly, with a joking tone, but I could hear in her voice and her actions just how hard the week had been. I truly believed that out of everyone, only Horikita had had a worse time than her. It was an impressive effort she had put in, but I didn't want to ask more of her. It wouldn't do to push her away or break her as well. Kikyou was far too valuable to me.

And maybe, just maybe, I didn't want her to suffer for my victory. Maybe, I did care after all.

"That's why I gave Horikita the chance to be leader. She's definitely not incompetent, so she'll work as a cover, and besides, what could a self-proclaimed isolationist hate more than a class constantly talking to her."

As Kikyou slowly realised the situation we'd placed Horikita in, she began to laugh. Not the cute laugh she gave to everyone in public, but a proper boisterous laugh, of genuine happiness and humour.

"Hahahaha! Oh my god this is horrible! She'll hate every minute of being leader!"

"That's the idea."

We stood there in good spirits, looking out over the ocean we couldn't see. Even with the moon and stars out above, there was no light reflecting off the black expanse before us. The island exam was over, and Class D had come out on top. It had taken effort, but in the end, there wasn't who could stand against us. If this was just the first exam, then I couldn't wait to see what came next.

Ryuuen, Sakayanagi, Kanzaki, Ichinose. I can't wait to face you all. Together with Kikyou by my side, I'll crush you all.

Authors Notes

So, that's the end of arc 3. Wow, really was a lot of fun to write. I finally feel like I broke away from the novel successfully, with a bunch of chapters completely on their own. Hopefully the next arc will be even more so, almost completely original, aside from rule explanation and stuff.

Ryuuen had a backup plan. It got seen through, sure, but did you really think he'd count out Ayanokouji? More on that in the SS, but it's something I was pretty happy with when I came up with it.

So, uni exams over the next two weeks. This arc has three SS I've written for it, so expect them spread out over the time so you aren't

starved for content, and I can not rush with reading and planning out Arc 4. I've got quite a few ideas for what to put in it, so it will take time to whittle them down a bit.

Horikita as leader, eh, I was iffy on whether to follow with this but honestly it just makes sense. Out of all the candidates who are capable of a leadership role, I'd say it's only Ayanokouji, Kouenj, Kushida, Hirata, Horikita and maybe Matsushita? Half of those have no interest, Kushida can't because she's nice, Hirata is broken and I really don't see Matsushita as leadership material.

But I digress. The main take away from this Arc and the SS is that I still can't write Ryuuen. Yes, he is getting one this time, huzzah! But it still feels off. Better than what I scrapped at the end of arc 2, but still feels weird. Eh, feedback will help so tell me what's wrong with Ryuuen.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed! Arc 3 was fun and I've got lots more planned, especially once holidays start and life's a bit more relaxing.

(Also, whoever thought the island exam rules were confusing i've spent an hour and a half looking at the mixed training camp rules and I'm still kinda stumped with them, probably because I also don't remember that book well. Jesus fucking christ it's convoluted, kudos to Kinugasa)

Arc 3 Chapter 11.5.1 - SS Horikita 2

What does it mean to have an ally?

That's what Ayanokouji told me, as he beat me to the ground. That I need to have allies. And maybe he was right.

In this school, it seems I can't live alone.

I want to get to Class A. If I'm ever going to be acknowledged by nii-san, then I need to get there. I will not be his disappointing little sister. I will prove to him that I'm worth his time.

And to do that, I need allies.

That's what Ayanokouji was trying to tell me. He'd been trying to tell me that for months now, poking and prodding constantly, engineering situations to my benefit. He knew that he wouldn't work for the class, and so he gave me the opportunity to do it myself.

And like an idiot I ignored it.

Out of stupid misplaced pride, I disregarded his efforts, I ignored his words, convinced I didn't need help from someone like him. Someone pathetic.

It turns out I was the pathetic one after all.

To think I actually considered myself above him. Sure, for years I had gone along being the best at everything that mattered, but even so, to ignore the evidence right in front of me was the most conceited thing I have ever done.

Ayanokouji was a genius, I'd known that since I met him. He was also strong. He'd beaten nii-san in a fight, but I'd deluded myself into disbelieving that had happened.

Now I'd experienced it myself I knew better.

Everything he'd said to me was right. In between every blow, with unimaginable power behind them, was an accusation just as strong as his blows.

"I gave you respect in the class by saving Sudou."

Yes, he had organised the situation so that I was the hero, of sorts, the one to save Sudou from expulsion. And from that, much of the animosity had cleared up.

"I gave you a loyal follower to help your actions."

This was a painful reminder of what I had ignored. Sudou had been at my side constantly since I saved him, feeling he owed me a debt. And I had consistently pushed him away, ignored him, and

wasted the potential of having him work for me.

True, he was unwieldly, incapable of doing complex tasks, but having him as my pawn would have made this exam just a little bit easier to win myself. Instead, in his time of crisis, when he came to me for help I turned him away, intent on letting him suffer an unjust punishment to teach him a lesson.

"I gave you a chance to be leader of the class. And you ignored all of these."

This one hurt the most. Ayanokouji had made me leader. Even Kouenji had recognised it as a good choice, knowing I could do it, but what had I done with the opportunity?

I had sat, alone, and wallowed in self-pity. Yes, I was suffering from an illness, but that didn't stop me from directing others. I had every chance to become the leader, to prove my worth, but instead I gave up on the exam, believing it to be impossible, while Ayanokouji made the impossible a reality.

"It's pathetic. You believe yourself superior, and yet you fail so easily. It's good that you aren't the leader. If we had to rely on you, there'd be no hope of victory."

He was right. I was pathetic.

The class had relied upon me to secure our spot, and I was so incompetent at that that Ayanokouji had taken advantage of my uselessness. I couldn't even manage the single task I was given.

If I had been the leader, I don't think we would have won. That was something I had to admit. When it came to this exam, in the condition I was in, I couldn't have pulled off whatever Ayanokouji did.

No, even normally, I couldn't have done it.

Because, unlike him, I was alone.

Ayanokouji had Kushida helping him. I didn't know what was going on between them, but in any case, she was assisting him with winning the exam.

They were trying to hide it, obviously, and most people wouldn't have noticed, but I had spent the week watching Ayanokouji, and she was with him for an exorbitant amount of time. She'd even slept in his hammock one night, although I had no idea how that situation had come about. No, even though he was doing everything himself, he still knew the value in an ally, and kept Kushida by his side to control the class.

That was something I was too foolish to do.

Time and again, in the few months I'd been at this school, every situation came down to me being alone. I had no friends, not because no one wanted to be my friend, but because I pushed them all away. I had no allies, because I hadn't made an effort to get any.

I had created my own isolation, and now this was the result.

That knocking on the door, the pain in my whole body despite the pain killers, it's a familiar one. I had thought I had crushed them years ago, set in my ways, but it seems they've returned again. If it isn't the consequences of my actions.

Was this the end of my story? Was this how my high school life would go? Constant losses, while Ayanokouji carries me to Class A, if he even cares enough to do so. Was that really how I was going to go out? Did I really peak in middle school, only to find someone better than me and give up at the first hurdle?

I couldn't trust Ayanokouji to get me to Class A. Even if I wanted to rely on him to do that, I couldn't accept someone else being responsible for me achieving my goals. If anyone was going to get me to Class A, it would be me.

No, this wasn't the end for me.

Ayanokouji had given me one last chance. It was insulting, but at this point I couldn't be picky enough to disrespect him, to knock back his offerings just because of my over-inflated ego. He had named me the reason we won the island exam. While to the people that mattered in the grade would know it was him, to Class D at least, they would think it was me.

For now, I had a chance. I could become the leader of the class, as fake of a role as it was, and do my part.

I knew it was a ruse. An elaborate trick, to convince the rest of the grade that Ayanokouji had no interest in the exams. He put me in charge as a figurehead leader, content that I would play the cover for him while he won the war.

Now he had made a mistake.

If he thought I was just going to roll over and play ball, he was sorely mistaken.

Yes, you've beaten me down. You've exposed my weakness, my ego, my flaws. You've shown me how pathetic I've been. But you made a mistake of assuming I would stay dead.

You made me a figurehead leader Ayanokouji. You gave me a position where I would keep the class in line while you did all the work. But for the entirety of human history, its been known that power lies where men perceive it.

To you, I am a sham. But to the class, I will be their genuine leader. I won't trust you, and I won't let you take me to Class A. I'll do that myself. And one day, this false power you've given me will become real. Eventually, I will be the actual leader of Class D, and then we will have a reckoning.

Play your game, Ayanokouji. I've learnt my lesson as you intended, but probably far too well. You haven't killed me nearly

hard enough. You thought I was stubborn before, refusing to see the world? See what my stubbornness brings you.

He did win the exam, and for that I'll forgive what happened. If he really is working for the betterment of the class, then I can accept that and work with him. But like he said, Ayanokouji only works for his own self interests. It just happened that this time they aligned with the class.

And that's why I cannot trust him.

I don't know what it's like to work with people. I don't know how to lead, not really. But I have this chance, and this time, I won't squander it.

I will learn what it means to have an ally.

Authors Notes:

So, ever since Y2V5 came out there has been significantly more Horikita hate. I still haven't read it, so I don't know why, but boy am I keen to find out. Thank you everyone for not spoiling it, even though it's probably something people want to talk about.

I dunno what to say about this. For this fanfic, I feel like it's genuine character progression, so I'll ask that you all take a moment and consider whether this is reasonable before instant monkey brain 'hur dur Horikita bad' kicks in. It's entirely possible that's the case, and I'd agree so for some parts of this SS, but for others I feel like are genuinely reasonable for her.

This was a difficult one to write, trying to figure out Horikita's mental after the island exam, but I'm pretty happy with how it turned out. Short and sweet, and the other two SS will be the same, just something to keep my mind going and content for you all while I break my mind over partial differentials. Seriously, just end me. 55% exam on applications of second order partials is pain, although I fucking love it which is why I picked maths. Maths degree was best choice I ever made highly recommend.

My sleep deprivation is kicking in.

Anyways, as always, hope you enjoyed! See you next time for my favourite of the three, Ichinose.

Arc 3 Chapter 11.5.2 - SS Ichinose 1

Is this where my story ends?

My journey through high school, is it over already? Not that I'm going anywhere, but the world here is a very different place from what it had been like before.

Not just the world, but the people in it.

Actually, it was mostly the people. It seemed everyone was different from how they were in middle school.

Not that I had known any of my fellow classmates in middle school, but the attitude, the thought patterns, the emotions were completely upside down.

I came here to move on from my past, to return to the Honami I had been before the incident, but it seemed that was a task more complicated than I had imagined.

I guess I really was naïve...

I came here to experience what I had missed out on, to return to the days on the playground, to spending time with my friends. To enjoy life and get along with everyone, to spend three years of high school in a happy peaceful time.

But that wasn't possible anymore.

Most of that I blamed on Ayanokouji, although it wasn't really his fault.

In the end it was mine.

This school encouraged competition, the forced it to happen, and he simply picked up on that earlier than most. No, the real person to blame was me.

Me and my naïve ideals.

I thought everything would be the same, that everyone could get along happily. And it was that thinking that almost doomed my class.

Of course, I was more than ready for the competition. A challenge to reach Class A, sure I was all for that. It was fun, exciting. A reason to interact with other classes, in a friendly battle for the top. I had made some moves, tried to build connections in other classes, not just out of friendship but to establish feelers. The only person who saw through me was Ayanokouji.

I guess that's what I get for not being completely sincere in my friendship with him.

I had wanted to be friends, but at the same time I was trying to use him, at least his brain, in a small way. No, it wasn't his fault for striking back at me, for breaking me off from my class, it was my own for violating my ideals.

And in my class, it was over. We had spent the day playing at the beach, before relaxing on the cruise ship, and at first everything seemed ok. After the commotion with the reveal of the results, and Kanzaki's betrayal, it seemed everything had gotten back to normal.

But I could tell what was going on.

I'm not so naïve to be unable to read the room, to tell everyone was wary of me. Of course they did their best not to show it, my beloved class of friends, but none of them seemed to know what to do, how to react.

Because they were right, it was my fault we almost lost. And it was Kanzaki who saved us.

Which is why it wasn't a surprise when he called me up to the deck that night and told me bluntly he wanted me to step down from my leadership position.

And honestly, I agreed with him.

I wasn't capable of being a leader. I wasn't capable of making the hard choice, of prioritising people, of going up against the cruel ruthlessness in other classes. I couldn't do it.

All I could do was be a good friend.

And there they went, my dreams and hopes, rushing off the boat into the black expanse before me.

I was no longer a leader of Class B. Actually, when we returned to school, we'd be Class A now, and I had nothing to do with that.

That was Kanzaki, and even then, it wasn't really him. Everything came back to Ayanokouji. It was the genius of Class D who saved us, for reasons I couldn't understand.

I found him this afternoon, relaxing in his cabin alone, and I asked him then. I asked him why he chose Kanzaki over me, why he tried to isolate me from my class, because it was clear that was his goal. Everything he had done, all the words he had spoken had been to undermine me and break me off.

His response left me more confused than ever.

"Out of everyone in this school, there is no greater threat to me or my ally than you, Ichinose. Kanzaki is weak, so I removed you, and left him to fail."

I didn't see how I was a threat. I was plain old Ichinose. I wasn't a genius like him or Sakayanagi, I wasn't cold and ruthless like Ryuuen. I couldn't compete with them; this exam had made it perfectly clear. I was a naïve little girl, who thought the world could be united in kindness.

There was nothing I could do, or would want to do, beyond special exams that could threaten him. I wasn't cruel or vicious, and I didn't want to target him. I had given him a warning, yes, but it was an empty promise. I didn't think I could bring myself to expel anyone, not really, and I'm pretty sure he knew it too, when he told me I was like Nagumo.

I wondered what Nagumo would think.

His protégé, the student he had selected to succeed him, couldn't even lead her own class. I was a failure in that manner too.

'One day I'll be the Student Council President' I had told him. What a joke. I truly was pathetic for thinking at that. He had chuckled at the time. I thought he was simply impressed by my ambitions, but now I could see the truth too.

He was laughing at me.

And he was right to do so.

In this school, I couldn't be me. That was what I had learned. If I wanted to reach Class A, as I have the entire time, I couldn't remain as the kind Ichinose, the person I always aspired to be.

Kanzaki could lead the class, but he couldn't unite them. That was something I knew for a fact, and it was why I had ended up as the leader in the first place. Yet in the end, I wasn't capable of being a leader. Neither of us were.

Class B was an excellent class, with an excellent, if quirky, homeroom teacher. All of my classmates were incredible, and I loved every minute I spent with them.

Yet, I didn't think any of us alone were capable of standing up to the likes of Ayanokouji, Ryuuen and Sakayanagi.

I had been watching what happened at the meeting. Class A had collapsed far too easily, the students too happy to see Katsuragi fail. If what I suspected was correct, if Sakayanagi had had her followers intentionally lose the exam just to take control of the class...

There was no one in Class B who could fight against ruthlessness like that.

I looked over to my right, towards the prow of the ship, where the only two other people on the deck were standing. The greatest threat to me and my class, who for some reason I couldn't understand had singled me out as a danger, and the girl who I assumed he meant was his ally.

Ayanokouji and Kushida were standing there together. I heard Kushida laugh, loudly and happily at something, before leaning her head on his shoulder. Obviously, they were very close, which was a given considering they were working together, but why either of them considered me a threat I couldn't fathom.

The two of them – and what a strange pairing it was – were

together quite often. I had joked about them dating when I first met Ayanokouji at the special building, and even though they had brushed it off, there was definitely something between them.

I couldn't believe Kushida would target me, though. For whatever reason she had sided with Ayanokouji, I still knew her as one of my closest friends in the grade, outside of my class, and she was too honest, too kind to have a problem with me. I don't know what Ayanokouji was talking about, but I couldn't believe I could ever be at ends with Kushida.

But I wasn't going to lose.

If Ayanokouji thought I was just going to role over and take it, to simple be isolated from my class and my friends, cut off as untrustworthy, removed from being leader, then he didn't understand who I was.

Whatever it took, I would get back up. I had pulled myself out of a deep darkness to come to this school, and I wasn't going to abandon that effort yet. No, Kanzaki, nor anyone else, myself included, could stand up against him. Ayanokouji was beyond reason, beyond understanding, at least to me, but eventually, Kanzaki would falter. The class would suffer, they would go against him, and while I didn't want to imagine it, they would probably lose.

When that happened, I would be there for them. I didn't blame them for pushing me out of the leader role, I had made too many mistakes to fulfill it. But I would stay strong. I would remain Ichinose, the girl I had once been, and was trying to be again. I would hold the class together, and keep the peace and unity we had enjoyed for months so far.

And when we faltered, when we stumbled, I would be there to help put the pieces back together, to stand beside Kanzaki, with the classes faith in me restored, and together, united, we could win.

It wouldn't be easy. It was going to be incredibly hard. But to defeat the emotionless boy standing at the front of the boat, it would take all of us together.

Maybe, the class was done with me. If that was the case then I would respect it.

I could live out my days at this school as an ordinary student, leaving the leadership to Kanzaki, or whoever took his place if he too fell. I could spend time with my friends and get along with everyone.

But my class had trusted me to be leader. I had let them down, I had let Nagumo down, I had let my hopes and dreams down, but I would not give up on them. If the day came when they wanted me back, or needed my help, there was nothing I would like more than

to once again stand beside them.

This school wasn't a nice place. It tore people and friendships apart. It incited betrayal, sabotage, and all manner of nasty tricks. I couldn't survive in an environment like that. I was a naïve kind girl, who had learnt her lesson now.

I won't play the same game as my opponents. I'll play it better. I'll show them, that I cannot be broken. I'll show them, that one day I will be leader again.

And I'll show them, that this isn't where my story will end.

Authors Notes:

Aight, I crushed my written matlab exam, for whatever fucking reason someone came up with that. Written code without documentation of google should be annihilated. One down two to go. Once I get home I'll be settling in with a mug cake and Y2V5 MTL. It's out! Yay! In case anyone wants to read it, it was done by RoyalMTL, here you go:

https://royalmtls.wordpress.com/cote-year-2-volume-5/

For those who haven't read it yet, enjoy Y2V5. I can't wait to read it and not have to hide from the subreddit anymore, despite hating MTL with a passion. Seriously, there's always some basic stuff that's messed up and makes it super hard to follow every now and then. Not that I can really complain since I'm so hyped to finally read it.

I would still like to keep the no spoilers policy, since it won't have an impact on my story, and I know there are people who prefer to wait for official translations (case and point: my beta, who still hasn't found out about bullshit Nagaymo confession in Y2V4.5), so if we could keep that up that would be wonderful.

Onto the relevant stuff.

I FINALLY FIGURED OUT WHO ICHINOSE REMINDS ME OF!!! Euphemia from Code Geass. They're literally the same character. Kind and considerate, but not idiots. Both are pretty smart, and can be sneaky about stuff, and both are kinda naive about the way the world works. They're literally identical.

This chapter was interesting to write, because I know whats going to happen to her as this story goes on, and it's not going to be fun. Poor Ichinose. Writing it with a positive outlook was difficult, but I'm pretty happy with the way I captured her character.

Ichinose is Ayanokouji's greatest threat? I mean I kinda like the idea. His entire strategy, in the novels and this fic, is to avoid being noticed, to work within the problems and behind the shadow of people not understanding. While Sakayanagi and Ryuuen are strong opponents, Ichinose threatens his ability to exploit weaknesses and engineer situations, since she would create a dictatorship of unity.

Head on he can crush her easil, but the way he operates would never work when going against her class. Like really, the way he fixes Ichinose's bullying problem is by causing more rumors. Anything head on or united is a much harder obstacle for Ayanokouji to face, at least in my opinion.

Also, definitely Kushida number 1 enemy. For obvious reasons.

Anyway, that's all for my ranting. As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 3 Chapter 11.5.3 - SS Ryuuen 1

What does fear feel like?

Not once in my life had I felt it, never. That was where my strength came from. I could never lose; I could never be defeated.

Everyone who had ever lost did so out of fear. Fear of death, fear of betrayal, fear of me. They surrendered or fell under my unending confidence, incapable of standing up or keep fighting against my unending assault.

I had never in my life felt fear before, and this school was no different.

I hadn't come across anyone who could make me feel fear, not that I was looking for it. No, what I was looking for was a challenge. And I had found it in Ayanokouji.

That monster completely defeated me. I was utterly crushed as he saw through every single plan, figured out my every move. But still I wasn't afraid of him.

I was excited.

Finally, an opponent who I couldn't intimidate, who I couldn't threaten or bribe or backstab. He had no weaknesses, that I could see, and would find and exploit even the slightest mistake someone made.

Ibuki had buried her camera and walkie-talkie far away from the Class D camp, yet he had still found them. I left the walkie-talkie on the table, an innocuous inconspicuous mistake, yet just from that he figured out my entire plan.

He could read me, in a way that no one else ever could. Just from my actions, in our short 10-minute conversation, he was able to figure out that I wasn't the leader, even though all the hidden evidence had been placed to make it seem like I was.

That had been Shiina's idea. I was surprised to see her get involved, but she had her reasons, and even though it hadn't helped in the end, against any other opponent her input would have been invaluable.

She had been the one to suggest that I wasn't the leader, but to fake that I was and hide it. A two-layer bait, wherein once someone had seen through the first deception, they would grow complacent, satisfied with their own success, and not look any further. It was a brilliant strategy, one I hadn't thought of myself, but unfortunately,

you couldn't slip anything past that bastard.

I couldn't wait to fight him myself.

I didn't care what manner it was, how I did it, as long as I got to beat the monster I would be happy.

This school was amazing. The entire system was setup for classes to fight, which meant that in the next three years, I would be encouraged to challenge him again and again.

Because I knew it would take time. Twice now, he had crushed me, snatching victory from a situation I had engineered to solidify my victory. To beat someone of his caliber would take time. I wasn't under any delusion that I could crush him now.

I had watched as he fought Suzune, but fought is a generous term. He demolished her. It was incredible. I had never seen such a one sided fight in my life, but the best part was the man himself.

He didn't even care.

It was clear from his face, the way he moved, that this was something that didn't even concern him. Utter destruction of someone who clearly had some martial arts training, and it wasn't even worth his time.

Even better, was he was taunting her.

He could have taken her down in one blow. I could feel the power behind them just from watching the fight, and it was clear he was intentionally holding back, and targeting stronger parts of her body to make the fight last longer. I had no doubts that if it came to a one-on-one confrontation, he could end any fight as quickly as he wanted. I doubt even Albert could have stood up to him.

Instead, he dragged it out, torturing the bitch, teaching her a lesson. I think the fight would have happened even if he didn't need to get her key card.

Ayanokouji just wanted to teach her a lesson.

But that was the difference between me and her. She fell down and couldn't get back up. She curled up in a ball and cried, begging for the pain to end. She was broken and humbled, and I didn't think she would ever recover from the damage he had caused to her, both physically and mentally.

I wouldn't do that.

For the next three years, monster, I'll be targeting you. No matter how many times you beat me, no matter what happens, I won't give in.

You've beaten me twice. You'll probably beat me more. It doesn't matter how many times. You can take me down in one hit, or drag it out slowly, it won't change anything.

I will never give up. No matter how much I lose, no matter how much I suffer, I won't feel fear, and I won't be afraid of you, and I

won't give up.

You can beat me into the dirt. You can drive my class down to zero points, and while I'm working for them, now I'm also working against you.

Eventually, you'll make a mistake. Eventually, I'll catch you unawares. You'll walk around a corner into six people, and be attacked from all sides. I'll break into your dorm at night and beat you while you sleep.

I don't care what it takes. Things like honor are pathetic and worthless crutches for the losers of the world. I will beat you, no matter what I have to do.

The key is to target a weakness. Everyone has one. And now I know what yours is.

Kikyou.

I don't think you care about anything or anyone. You don't have the ability to feel. I saw it in your face when you shit on Suzune, you don't understand empathy.

But you do care for Kikyou, in whatever twisted way it is.

She's your weak link. She's your connection to the rest of the school. If nothing else, you need her on your side. Without her, you lose.

So, defend yourself from me. I'll come at you, and you'll fight me off. But I'll also be coming for Kikyou. Not now, not yet. We'll have some fun first, just you and me. But eventually I'll come for her too. Then we'll see just how capable you really are, you bastard.

I've never felt fear. I never will. I'm not capable of it. And even you, as powerful as you are, can't make me.

And that means you can't stop me.

I'm coming for you Ayanokouji.

I won't stop, and the only thing you can do is expel me. But I don't think you will, because where's the fun in that.

You and Kikyou, you're fighting alone. You've challenged the whole grade in this exam and won. Do you really think you can keep that up?

I suppose we'll see, you bastard.

But don't think for a minute, I'll ever be scared of you

Authors Notes

Right, so I really can't write Ryuuen. For fucks sake he's so difficult to get right. I spent at least twice as long on this than the other two, and it still ended up being half the length.

Main take-away from this chapter? Shiina got involved and helped out with the exam. Her reasons for that will be explained later, but the story is starting to properly diverge from the main

novels now. Arc 3 was a turning point.

Now onto the sad thing. When I was planning and writing this, the one thing I wanted to avoid was ever breaking my schedule, but unfortunately I'm going to have to. This fic will be on a one week hiatus while I over-study for my exams and recuperate from my body breaking down once I have no reason to force myself to function. I'm not doing amazing right now, it's a lot of pressure, and I haven't managed my time properly. So there, I have done what I was hoping to never have to do.

I will be writing during this week, but that's to keep some kind of buffer again, and to properly figure out this arc, because the Zodiac exam is kinda funky. Arc 4 will start next Sunday, once I'm free, so I apologies for doing the thing that frustrates me the most with other fics I read. I promise I will be back.

As always, hope you enjoyed! See you in a week.

Arc 4 Chapter 1 - Daily life on a cruise

It had been three days since the Island Special Exam had ended. Since then, the entire grade had been allowed to enjoy the vacation we were originally promised on the cruise, albeit with some caution and hesitancy from most people.

It was understandable, seeing how the island exam was such a surprise, but at this point, most people had started to relax, enjoying the cruise the way they had originally intended, doing whatever they wanted.

And that was how I had ended up in the underbelly of the cruise ship, following the piping to hopefully solve my problem, whilst being followed by two of my roommates.

"You two really shouldn't be down here you know."

Yukimura, one of the best at academics and worst at sports was following behind Kouenji and I, as we hunted for the solution to our problem.

"Silence yourself glasses. The fate of my very existence is at stake here, and if demon-boy and myself cannot solve this problem you too will suffer our fate."

Kouenji was exaggerating somewhat, although to him it was probably true. However, he wasn't wrong. If we didn't solve this issue now, it would be too late.

"If you aren't going to help us then leave, Yukimura. We're on a serious quest, so steel your heart or give up now."

It was a dramatic statement, but I was getting into character. Perhaps it was the ridiculousness of the situation, but I was enjoying this, at least a little.

"Hey, I'm just following you to make sure you don't break any rules. We aren't supposed to be down here in the first place."

No, students weren't supposed to be down here. This was one of the workers corridors, and an underused one at that. The wall was lined with different pipes, transferring various liquids and air around the ship, and weren't meant to be tampered with. Unfortunately, for the sake of our safety I would have to break this rule.

It had been three days of relaxation, and for the boys in the room across from us, being Ike, Yamauchi, Sudou and Sotomura, they had left their room only a couple of times. I had seen them outside a

total of twice, both for meals, and the smell of their room had started to creep out through the gap beneath the door.

One of them had had the genius idea to stick the 'no cleaning' sign on the door to their room, so when the daily cleaning came through, their room was missed. If it continued any longer, the smell would reach our room, and our doom would be sealed.

It was imperiatve that we acted now.

"I believe this is the correct one, Ayanokouji-boy."

Kouenji, unwilling to risk filth from the ship coming into contact with his person, pointed to the correct pipe out of the mass that we had been looking through. There were at least a hundred of them, but luckily, they were all named, and Kouenji had managed to find the correct one.

"Ah, thanks."

"This benefits me significantly, hence it would be remiss of such a perfect existence to reap the rewards without assisting in any way."

His warped way of thinking aside, Kouenji could prove to be quite helpful when the mood struck him.

"Wait, you aren't planning to do anything with the pipes are you?! Are you crazy?"

"Why did you think we were down here otherwise, then?"

"Use your brain glasses-kun, it's your one somewhat redeemable feature. Where on the ship are we?"

Yukimura, his face flushed with anger at the insult, did his best to ignore Koueji's words and considered the question. It took him a moment, perhaps as he tried to conceptualise the ship in his mind, before figuring it out.

"We're underneath our cabin."

Almost right, although there was a rather large margin for error, so it was understandable that he hadn't quite got it right.

"Close. We're actually underneath our neighbours' cabin."

Yukimura made a face at the mention of our disgusting class perverts. Like all people in Class D, he had his own defect, but Yamauchi and Ike were on another level. Sudou had shaped up somewhat, and Sotomura was his own brand of loveable weird, but the first two were irredeemable.

I moved to the pipe that Kouenji had indicated, and sure enough, it was the pipe coming from their room. I felt bad for the cleaners, but something had to be done.

"Woah, you're not actually gonna do something are you?"

"Sometimes, Yukimura, you have to stand up for what you believe in."

And with that, I twisted the valve on the pipe, cutting off the outflow from their room. I estimated it would take about half an

hour before their pipes backed up, and their toilet began to overflow. It was disgusting, but it would get them out of their room, and get cleaners in. A small price to pay for salvation.

"Congratulations, demon-boy, you now carry the honour of saving one such as perfect as me. Now, I must return to the pool. My body will degrade if I remain in this filth any longer."

And with that, the strange man left, without a care in the world. Yukimura was staring at me with a strange expression on his face, one I couldn't understand.

"What did you just do?"

"I got the room across from us to be cleaned. Let's go, I'd rather not be seen down here."

Saying that, I followed after Kouenji, and after a moment's hesitation, Yukimura did too, leaving the valve shut, not messing with my work. Luckily, it seemed no one was down here at this time of day, and I hadn't spotted any security cameras on our way here, so it was unlikely that we would get into any trouble for this.

Realistically, most people would just assume that the boys clogged the pipes themselves, and even when the valve was found to be shut, there wouldn't be any evidence leading back to us.

We moved back in silence, Yukimura not sure what to say, probably thinking of some way to complain about our actions, me having nothing to say to him. The passages were quite long, branching off often, but as I explored through them, taking a slightly less efficient route back, it became clear that they had been cleverly designed.

Getting to one point from another on the ship would be much easier using these. There were private elevators for staff only, and without unnecessary winds and bends around fancy but useless designs, it was a lot quicker to move around. Although using these came with the added risk of discovery, if I ever had a need to get from one end of the ship to the other in a short amount of time, knowing how they worked would be handy.

Yukimura, deaf to the world as usual, was about to move around a corner when the sound of footsteps reached my ears. I grabbed him, and dragged him by the collar back around, clamping my hand over his mouth so we wouldn't be heard.

"Stupid smug student thinks he's so amazing. God, there's no way to deal with him, it's ridiculous."

A bellhop was muttering to himself, apparently fed up with one of my year mates. He passed right by our hiding place, and although we weren't concealed all that well, he seemed so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice us.

"Thinks he can get away with anything by signing his name on a

piece of paper? What sort of delusion is that? And what kind of name is Kouenji Rokusuke?"

Oh. That made much more sense.

I could see Yukimura rolling his eyes beside me at the mention of our partner in crime, but with a good sense of restraint he made no comment. Not long after, the bellhop made his way around a bend and out of sight, and we quickly dashed across the hall and out from the service corridor back into the main lobby.

"Are you happy? We almost got caught breaking rules. Who knows how much damaged you just caused to the boat!"

I sighed. Yukimura was smart, there was no denying that. But he constantly failed to walk the fine line required to truly be intelligent. What people refer to was wisdom, I simply believe to be intelligence combined with rationality. Being able to reason, to logically analyse a situation and make a good choice. Yukimura went beyond that, allowing his mind to run wild, wherein it immediately reached for the most dangerous conclusions. It wasn't a bad habit to have, but if left unchecked, like he did, it would hinder his ability to ever properly analyse a situation.

"It's fine. There's no evidence and no one saw us do it."

He rubbed his forehead, face contorted in a frustrated expression.

"Whatever. Just don't drag me into your problems again."

You were the one who followed me.

Yukimura turned and walked off, heading towards the restaraunts. It was almost lunch time now, so like most people, he would be starting to get hungry. I was too, but before I could eat I needed to see the results of my efforts.

I turned and moved in the opposite direction, down a level towards the cabins, before heading along the boy's side towards my cabin. It had been about half an hour since I closed the valve, so if it was going to work, it should be sometime soon.

And just as I was thinking that I could hear some yelling coming from the cabin opposite mine.

Arguments and accusations, most of it illegible through the closed door, began to spill out into the hall, before being followed by three boys, and a disgusting smell.

Ike, Yamauchi and Sotomura tumbled out, desperately trying to escape from their room. Looking in, I could see a pool of brown water flooding the ground around their toilet, the rooms being small enough to see from the open door.

"What did you manage to do now?"

"You shut up Ayanokouji! Our toilet's all backed up, it's horrible! Let me use yours."

Yamauchi made a dash for my door, trying to force his way in,

but luckily for everyone staying in that room it was locked, and Hirata wasn't in the mood to open the door.

"Maybe go find a teacher and let them know. Someone'll have to come and fix it, I guess."

Ike grabbed Yamauchi, pulling him away from clawing at my door. He shouldn't even need to go to the toilet, since it wouldn't have backed up unless someone flushed it, but even so his pride wouldn't allow him to stop acting angry to me.

"See you around, Ayanokouji."

Ike gave me a short farewell as he dragged Yamauchi away, which I disregarded entirely, instead waiting for Sotomura to pick himself up from the ground and reorganise himself. Straitening his glasses, he gave me his classic greeting, of convoluted meanings.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-dono, it seems you have stumbled across me at a rather inopportune moment."

"Not at all, in fact I was actually looking for you."

I had been meaning to speak with him for a while, however, with the island exam and him barely leaving his room too distracted by anime, I hadn't had a chance. This was another reason for forcing the boys out of their room.

"Oh? And for what possible reason could our very own master of mystery have to speak with me? Could it perhaps be an inquiry into our special project?"

It was my project, but I had included Sotomura simply to give him something to do, to fill his fantasies of being a secret agent, or whatever delusions he harboured. Most people might overlook him, but Sotomura was a wild card thanks to his knowledge of technology. I had no idea when I might need his help, but it would be much easier if he was already enamoured of me.

"Yes, that's right. I haven't had a chance to ask you since before school ended, so I'd like an update. Remember, we can't put any of this into texts, since the school could read it and find out."

"Of course, I would never forget such a crucial element. It's like an uprising against the dictatorship is about to begin, with me coordinating our forces from my computer flawlessly."

What we were doing was probably against school rules. It was never explicitly stated, but I suspected it wouldn't be looked kindly upon.

"So?"

He had gotten off track again, lost in his daydreams.

"Ah, yes. Unfortunately, I have been unable to make any further progress since last time. It seems I lack a crucial element of my experimentations, so if you could procure that for me it would certainly become a profitable endeavour."

After he told me what he needed, I thanked him for his continued work, along with a promise to get what he asked for, then sent him on his way to find his friends and report the state of their cabin.

What I had him working on was definitely something I could have done myself, but really, why bother when you can outsource.

Having finished my business with the cabin across from mine, I took a moment to contemplate what to do now. I was hungry, and it was lunch time, but those two facts were contrary to each other. Most of the grade would be moving towards the restaurants and buffets right now, leaving it a busy and crowded environment, with long wait times for food.

On the other hand, I had no desire to simply rest in my cabin. Hirata had holed himself up in there, only coming out once or twice a day for meals. It was a rather depressing environment, one built from self-pity and a lack of interest in anything. Something would have to be done about that before next term, and while I was sure the opportunity would present itself to solve that problem, I had no inclination to deal with him right now.

I decided to grab a pastry from a smaller café on the boat, and so I moved up a few levels, and headed to the front of the food and entertainment level, leaving the other end with the main restaurants and noise of uncultured animals.

Surprisingly, as I made my way along, I noticed a rather unusual sight. It seemed I had located the missing boy from the cabin across from me, and he was in a situation I never would have expected.

Sudou was having lunch with Horikita.

Even emotionally stunted as I was, I could tell just how excited and nervous he was, by the way he was moving his hands, and trying his best to act refined. Horikita, on the other hand, seemed completely oblivious to this, and continued to rapid-fire words at him, not noticing that they simply went in one ear and out the other.

It seemed she had taken my advice to heart and was making an effort to gain allies. To be honest, I hadn't thought she would recognise what I said to her and would dig her head further into the ground with that stubborn superiority, but apparently, I had gotten through to her.

This was a development I would have to keep an eye on.

Horikita undoubtedly held a grudge against me for my actions, and I couldn't trust her to move on from what had happened. It was a fine line I had to walk, pushing her into a leadership position to manage the class so I didn't have to, but not give her enough power that she could actually move against me.

I didn't have confidence in her ability to move secretly, to plan

and scheme without me finding out about it, but power was in perception. If enough people believed she was our leader, then she would become the true leader, making it all the easier for her to strike back.

That wouldn't be a concern for a few months at least, though. Currently all she had was the loyal love of Sudou, and the hesitant faith of my classmates, if that. For now, I could allow her to act as she wanted. I was interested to see what she was capable of.

I reached the patisserie, and just as I had picked out a jam-filled croissant, something I had been very interested in trying like the butchered treat it was, when I was ambushed by my former pawns from Class A.

"Well, if it isn't Ayanokouji. What a coincidence!"

Hashimoto had approached me, pinching the croissant out of my hand before I could try it, and took a bite out of one end, some jam getting stuck on his cheek as he did so.

"Do you mind? I was looking forward to that."

Hashimoto grinned at my whinge, and passed the croissant back to me, wiping the flaky crumbs off his shirt. Obviously, he had no regrets about his actions, after enjoying such a delicious treat. Since they obviously had business with me, I didn't bother to continue the conversation, allowing them to do so, while I took my first bite of my delicious treat.

It was an affrontment to all French cooking, but the jam was a delicious hint of sweet, inside the buttery air-like bread. Delicious.

I turned my attention to the person standing behind him, the second of the duo, who had a rather unimpressed look on her face. Kamuro had her phone in hand, holding it out to me, a call currently in progress. It seemed, based on how she was glaring at me, I'd caused her another problem, although I didn't know what I could possibly have done.

"It's for you. Next time just give someone your number, we've spent ages looking for you, dumbass."

Her usual brand of disinterest combined this time with a little annoyance. It seemed I had run them around the boat without realising.

I took her phone, having a good idea of who would be calling me. There was only one person not on this boat that would have a reason to contact me, and it made sense that she would use Kamuro to do so.

As I grabbed it, I noticed the strange caller id displayed on the phone. 'Flat bitch'. A small act of rebellion coming from Kamuro, although from all of their interactions, there was still a sense of loyalty. Despite most certainly being blackmailed into helping her,

Kamuro probably still supported her master to some degree. After all, betraying Sakayanagi was tantamount to dooming Class A.

"Sakayanagi."

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun. Impressive work in the special exam."

I had suspected the reason for the call, but if she was calling me just for this, then I would really be upset. You can't eat a croissant and talk, and Hashimoto was making eyes at it, probably wanting to have some more.

"I suppose I should thank you for lending me some help, although if you really wanted to bring down Katsuragi you need better aids."

"Oh? Do explain."

It seemed the two of them had left out the finer details of what had happened. Hashimoto was shaking his head, whilst simultaneously trying not to laugh, whilst Kamuro looked furious. It seemed she was going to be taunted some more for this mistake.

"The things I had them do were rather obvious. Any half-competent student could have doomed their class, and to a far greater extent than I did."

"Hmm, it seemed they left out some of the details of what occurred. Thank you for informing me, Ayanokouji-kun."

I pulled the phone away from my ear, before turning back to Hashimoto and Kamuro.

"You're in trouble."

At my words, his fit of laughter redoubled, forcing him to lean against the wall to keep upright. Apparently, Hashimoto was always looking on the bright side of life, keeping a positive image, whilst simultaneously ensuring he would graduate from Class A.

Kamuro just huffed and turned away. Apparently this was nothing new.

"I assume this isn't the only reason you called. Although I'm surprised you don't have my number already. I could have spared Kamuro the effort of tracking me down."

"Fufufu no, I rather enjoyed hearing her complaints as she tried to find you for the last hour, it was an enjoyable way to pass the time." I glanced at the phone, and noticed the call had indeed been running for 1:15:21. *"It's quite dull being alone at school, although I have found a chess partner in the student council president. He recommended I play you, actually."*

"How thoughtful of him."

"Quite. But no, I must say you've done a rather good job of protecting your phone number. I expended quite the large amount of effort to find it, to no avail."

Ever since the first day of school, I had kept my number private. There were only a few people in the school who had it, all of whom

I trusted not to spread it. If I needed to contact someone, I did it with caller id disabled, meaning that unless I wanted them to, they wouldn't have it. It was wise to copy Kiryuuin in that regard.

"I'll make sure to give you my number. I suppose it wouldn't hurt for you to have it."

"Many thanks for that. Now, onto the main reason. I think you've had my pawns for long enough. From this point on, Masumi and the snake no longer work for you. Unfortunately, I can't allow you to continually sabotage my class."

I had expected this, but it would have been remis for Sakayanagi to not explicitly state this. She wasn't going to allow me to keep beating her easily, especially with her own classmates.

"Obviously. I'll be looking forward to our competition."

It wasn't a lie. I was genuinely looking forward to battling Sakayanagi. So far, this school had been rather underwhelming. While I had never had any doubts of the outcome, I hadn't expected to crush the other classes that easily. Perhaps Sakayanagi would provide me with a challenge, or maybe I would be stuck battling Kouenji. Either way, there was no one else that could reasonably provide me a challenge.

"As will I. Enjoy the rest of your cruise, Ayanokouji-kun."

With that, she disconnected the call. Despite our conversation being over, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something. Why would Sakayanagi choose now to call. As far as I was aware, this was just a holiday, relaxing after our exam. Yet, she had made a point to contact me now, explicitly stating that I would no longer be receiving her aid. Something about that stuck me as odd, although I couldn't quite figure out what.

She mentioned she'd been in contact with Manabu. That was what had been annoying me. If she had...

I was dragged out of my thoughts by Kamuro snatching her phone out of my hand.

"Are you too done flirting?"

"Eh?" Were we?

"Whatever. You got the message, right? We're done now, thank god. Now I've only got one freak bossing me around."

"Ah, it's a shame, but it seems we are now enemies, boss. Go easy on me, won't you?"

Despite his carefree words, there was a glint in Hashimoto's eyes. Something about what he said told me he was looking forward to going against me, even if he thought I would win. Did that make him a masochist? Perhaps it was more nuanced than that. Whatever he was thinking, I couldn't figure it out.

"Thank you for that. I'll let you get back to your day."

I had a lot to think about. Perhaps it would be worth retiring to my room. At least Hirata's gloom made it quiet.

Author Notes:

Holy shit guess who's back. Arc 4 is here, the fic didn't end up on infinite hiatus in an abandoned state, mostly because of the pure rage i feel towards fics where that has happened.

This one was a lot of fun to write, a bit of simple chaos, trying to for once live up to the title of the fic. It's diverted somewhat from my original idea, so dragging it back a little for this chapter.

Over the week a bunch of stuff happened. I nailed my exams, especially the math one. It was honestly kinda disappointing, it was too easy, I was kinda looking forward to the challenge. That sounds a bit boastful i realise, but you ever put in a lot of work and it turns out to be wasted, it's kinda frustrating. I would have preferred to struggle with a question, not know how to do everything in perusal, you know? Anyway that's beside the point.

I finally read Y2V5. And honestly... i don't quite understand all the hate for Horikita. Perhaps I'm attached to Kushida from writing this, yeah, but honestly it seemed like the right choice to make in the situation. I don't really see whats so wrong about it. Maybe it's because she made the choice for the wrong reasons, but really, in the end the outcome was as good as it gets.

Watched arcane on Nexflix, and as a league of legends addict, it's pretty good. Highly recommend watching it, even if you don't play the game.

I have been on a cruise before, once, about five years ago so I don't remember it too well. I've done my best to recall what it was like, and while it won't be too accurate, I have fond memories of young me running through the service corridors to get to places quickly with my friends all cackling to ourselves at how naughty we were. Ah, better times.

Anyways, as always, hope you enjoyed! Bi-daily upload schedule is back in business, so see you all again in two days.

Arc 4 Chapter 2 - A New Exam

Going back to my cabin hadn't been any better than wandering around.

Hirata's gloom still permeated the air, and even Kouenji was avoiding it, finding Hirata's attitude to be damaging to his wellbeing. Even just trying to rest, there was a stifling, crippling feeling to the room, one which made conversation uncomfortable, and resting tense.

In other words, I would be better off hanging my hammock off the rail of the boat and sleeping there.

Actually, that wasn't such a bad idea. Perhaps I should find a spot on the deck where I could sleep.

So that's how I found myself relaxing on one of the deck chairs near the back of the ship, a sickeningly sweet drink in hand, enjoying the ocean breeze.

"Oh, Kiyotaka-kun, I didn't realise you were here."

And here came my partner in crime, Kushida Kikyou. One of the kindest and friendliest people in the grade, someone willing to go out of her way to help anyone, with a cute smile and a warm attitude.

There was no one in the grade I relied upon more than her.

"Kikyou."

A rather neutral greeting, but I wasn't known as someone who interacted with people often, and not without good reason. This didn't perturb her at all, the kindness of Kikyou an unstoppable force being forced into existence by herself.

"I haven't seen you in days! You haven't been avoiding me, have you?"

"Not at all. I know you have a lot of friends who want to catch up with you, and I didn't want to get in the way of that."

At my words, her face broke into a brilliant smile, although if one looked past that you could just discern a hint of glee in her eyes. Kikyou had many friends, all of which loved her and wanted to spend every second with their very own angel. In the words of my classmates, there was no one nicer, no one more reliable, no better friend than Kushida Kikyou. Yes, when it came to being nice, she truly was the best.

All the efforts she had put into this act had paid off.

"You're one of my friends too. Besides, who else are you gonna play with? It's not like you have any other friends."

It wasn't strictly true, as there were people I could hang out with, but most of those wouldn't be for fun. Kikyou was the only person I could somewhat relax around, a rather sad fact.

She took a seat on the chair beside me, stealing my drink and taking a sip. The resulting face she made was worth having a second person steal my stuff today. I could only hope this wouldn't become a recurring theme.

"Euughh! How can you drink that, it's disgusting?"

"Try going 15 years with barely any sugar, and there isn't any amount that could be too much."

"Huh?"

She gave me a quizzical look at my statement. It was true, while in the White Room, I was on a heavily controlled diet my entire life, designed to be optimally nutritious with nothing harmful at all. Obviously, while I was still given a small amount of sugar in my meals, it was virtually non-existent compared to the sugar in most foods at school.

This wasn't something that Kikyou knew about, however, and I wasn't going to be explaining any further.

"Never mind."

I laid back down on my chair, content to humour her for a while. Before I could properly relax however, both our cell phones started ringing at the same time. There was a loud, dinging sound that meant we'd received a message from the school. Usually, it was a message with new instructions to follow, or some kind of modification to an event. Your phone would make a sound even if you had it on silent. Clearly, it was a message of high importance.

"What is it?" Kikyou asked.

Even though they'd explained this system to us after school started, we hadn't received any important messages during our summer vacation until now. Simultaneously, an announcement could be heard throughout the ship.

"Attention. This is an announcement to all students. All students should have received a message from the school, as indicated in the contact line. Please check your individual mobile devices and follow the instructions accordingly. In the event that you did not receive a message, we apologize for the inconvenience. Please go to the nearest faculty member for assistance. Because the contents of the message are extremely important, please do not miss it. We repeat —"

"That was about the message we just got, right?" Kikyou asked.

"Probably."

I pulled out my phone and saw the following message:

A special test will begin soon. Place gather in the designated room at the designated time. Anyone who arrives later than ten minutes after start time may be penalized. Please gather in Room 202 on the second deck by 20:40 today. Because it takes about twenty minutes to reach the area, we ask that you please use the restrooms now if necessary. Either silence your phone or turn it off, and make your way over.

"A special test?"

So, this was what Sakayanagi had known. It was possible she knew what the exam was, and hence found it important to keep her pawns from obeying me. This probably wasn't going to be a paper test or physical fitness examination, or something you'd see at a regular school—much like the survival test on the island. However, nothing in the message implied what awaited us. My only hint was from my phone call, and even that told me nothing.

"Can you show me your phone for a second?" I asked.

Kikyou handed me her phone without hesitation, showing me she'd received the same message. This was incredibly unhelpful. I'd hoped that it would be different, allowing for just a hint of why we were being sent to the room, but I gained nothing from it.

I handed back her phone, noticing messages had started flooding in.

"Go on, do your thing."

Kikyou smirked at me, before leaning back in her chair, fingers beginning to fly across the screen.

Never before had I witnessed someone work like this. From the glances I could get of her screen, there was over 50 people messaging her right now, people from outside our class coming to her for answers. The central hub of our grade was sitting next to me, and all of the information was flowing in.

I gave her a while, and after about 15 minutes it seemed the number of messages had decreased, most people having gotten their reassurances in some form or another.

"So?"

It was time for Kikyou to earn her keep.

"Everyone's split up, it seems. 3 or 4 to a group, with meetings for three hours tonight in 20-minute intervals."

"Are there any cross-class groups?"

"I don't think so. Our meeting is the last for the night, though, so I'll probably be able to find out what's going on before then."

It was awesome work, considering the time frame and constant inflow of messages she had to juggle. Something like that was truly impressive. It required a very special type of concentration, to be able to not get overwhelmed, as well as building up the contacts in

the first place.

It was this talent in particular that made her irreplaceable.

"I suppose there's nothing to do but wait. Good work."

It was currently around 5pm. Most people would be heading to get some food now, especially if they had an earlier meeting time, meaning that nothing would be happening for at least an hour, and I wouldn't be able to confirm any details myself until then.

"You want to grab some food? It's going to be ages before something happens."

It seems Kikyou had been thinking along the same lines as me. Based on how busy she seemed to be usually, it was probably a rare chance that she got to actually decide something. More often than not, she was probably invited to an event, or asked to hang out, but never had the chance to really plan things herself.

I had no doubt that she would manipulate the situations into being something more favourable, but complete control over her life was probably something she was missing.

"Fine. I've been wanting to try that Italian place."

"Great! It's a date!"

Kikyou jumped up from her chair, hands clasped together out of happiness, the perfect picture of excitement. I could almost believe this was the real her. The closer we got, the harder it became to tell when she was acting around me.

I lifted myself up, and began to make my way back inside the ship, to hunt down a delicious spaghetti meal.

"By the way, were you looking for me? Don't tell me you missed me."

She elbowed me hard in the side, rolling her eyes at my poor attempt at humour.

"Har har. Don't you wish."

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

An empty plate sat before me, one which had previously contained a large serving of spaghetti and meatballs. It had been a delicious meal, added to the fact that I hadn't eaten all day aside from half a jam croissant. It was well cooked, if a little on the cautious side when it came to spices. If I had cooked the meal myself, there would have been a larger amount of garlic, oregano, onion. One could never have too much garlic, but in a restaurant environment this was the safer choice, in order to cater to more people.

Great, now I had to cook spaghetti and meatballs when we got back. My stomach would brook no alternatives.

"I don't know how I haven't been here before. That was amazing!"

Kikyou had opted for a carbonara, which again, appeared to be

impressively made. To be expected from a restaurant on a cruise ship of this caliber.

"I'm surprised you have time to eat with me. Don't you have other friends to hang out with?"

Kikyou giggled a little at my question. Apparently, I was missing something obvious.

"When will you figure out you're my friend too? I told them I was having dinner with you, it's fine," she answered. No, that was not fine.

"I've had questions about whether we were a couple. You understand the message that sends, right?"

It was a pointless question. Kikyou had an absolute understanding of all social cues and actions, and nothing she did was by accident. Every action was deliberate, considered, making sure to portray herself exactly as she wanted. She knew how this would come off, and did it anyway.

"It's fine, I can silence any rumours if they start to cause problems whenever I want. Besides, it's not like you're very good at spreading lies."

"Now what is that supposed to mean?"

She leaned back, a smug grin on her face.

"I've had questions too. About whether Horikita really was the one to win the island exam, or if it was actually you. People aren't buying it, not completely. Your reputation as a genius is working against you."

Hmm. I had anticipated this sort of outcome, and it was no problem, but it still wasn't an optimal situation. Next time I would have to confer with Kikyou to ensure I could lay a false idea in the classes mind without this kind of backlash.

Of course, it was always going to be difficult for me to convince people I had nothing to do with it. Katsuragi had forced me into a rather obtrusive position as one of the de facto leaders of Class D, and pushing it off onto the shoulders of someone most of the class disliked, while coming from the mouth of someone they all believed capable of winning the exam, was simply too much to ask for.

"It's no concern. I hadn't expected them to simply believe what I said. Just keep perpetuating the lie for now. All that needs to happen is for the class to believe it enough for Horikita to stop the class from sabotaging themselves."

"If you say so." Kikyou didn't look convinced, but luckily, she didn't push the issue. "Anyway, it's 6:20 now. Should we find out what's going on?"

Ah yes, the real reason for us waiting in this restaurant. By now, one of the Class D groups should have finished, assuming there was

one group per class every 20 minutes. The only question was whether Kikyou knew who was in that group: the chances of that was very high.

"Who was just in the meeting?"

She glanced down at the list on her phone, which she'd been creating for the past hour, separating and organising the grade by their time, room and class. At this point, she'd accumulated about half of the year, an impressive feat in and of itself.

"Hmm, the only person I know is Karuizawa-san."

"Call her here. It'll be better if she explains in person."

"Alright." Kikyou seemed a little dubious about that, but I saw no problem in the situation. Whatever the school was planning had to be a convoluted plot, if they needed to separate us so much, and it would be much easier to explain the fine details in person. I couldn't truly read into a situation through simple messages.

After about five minutes, Karuizawa arrived at the restaurant.

"Hey, Kushida-san! Oh, and Ayanokouji-kun. I didn't realise you were here too."

Her face fell slightly at the sight of me, but I didn't take it personally. Kikyou obviously hadn't mentioned I'd be here too, and my relationship with Karuizawa was close to nothing. We had interacted a few times at the start of school, and she probably saw me in a slightly more favourable light than most of the boys, due to my closeness with Hirata at the time, but as for me as a person she didn't really have an opinion. At least not one based on our interractions.

"Karuizawa-san! Take a seat, you must be tired after your meeting."

I had pulled a seat around to the table earlier, and she proceeded to drop herself into it, an air of tiredness spreading around her. Normally, the restaurant wouldn't tolerate messing up their seating, but we'd just ordered more drinks, and it wasn't very busy right now, seeing as most of the grade was at their meetings, so we didn't get a second look.

"God, that was horrible. You mind if I get some food first?"

There wasn't a way for us to realistically say no, so we waited for her to flag down a waiter and order a small serving of the most expensive item on the menu. She couldn't pronounce it correctly, but it was a clear status move, and I suspected she had no idea what she just ordered.

"Do you mind explaining what happened in your meeting?" I tried to get the conversation rolling.

"Oh, sure. It's kinda confusing, and I don't really understand it all, but have you ever played the game Werewolf?"

I had not, but Kikyou's eyes showed recognition to the game. After it was explained to me, I began to understand what was going to happen.

"Right, so it's like that, but with a bunch of groups. There's 12 groups, named after the zodiac, and each one had a bunch of students from all four classes."

Most of this I had already guessed, based on the timings of the groups. The groups would probably be 12 or 13 people, with 3 or 4 from each class. It was likely that the students in Class A, B and C who were also in Karuizawa's group had been briefed at the same time as her, just in different rooms.

"Every group has one person called the VIP, and basically they play the role of the werewolf. Like, it's everyone else's job to figure out who they are."

It really was a reversal of the Island Exam. While both have one central figure who needs to be hidden, the island exam was a physical test, this was a purely psychological one. It would involve reading actions, detecting lies, making strategies. Everything in this exam came down to how well you could lie.

"And what are the outcomes of the exam?"

Karuizawa, who had been speaking explicitly to Kikyou, turned to me with a dirty look.

"I've got no idea; I couldn't understand it properly. Mashima-sensei wouldn't stop talking and the two boys with me wouldn't shut up. Like, seriously, just answer me when I ask a question! Isn't that the point of the meeting?"

Apparently Karuizawa had maintained herself consistent with expectations and hadn't paid attention, whilst simultaneously blaming everyone else around her.

"Do you at least know who's in your group?"

She brightened once more, no longer giving me the stink eye. As she pulled her phone out and opened up the notes app, the reason for that became clear: I had asked her a question she could actually answer.

"Oh yeah, totally. They told us everyone who was in our group, even the people from other classes. Here, take a look if you want."

She passed her phone to Kikyou, who in turn passed it to me. I took a quick glance, memorising the list of names, before handing it back. Now that I had them, I could start formulating the lists for all twelve groups, figuring out if there was any kind of pattern or theme. So far, from Karuizawa's Rabbit group, I couldn't identify one, but I only had that and about 50 other student groupings so far, so it was still early days.

Going over her group, it was easy to see why she was so upset

about the classmates in it. Sotomura was difficult enough to deal with at the best of times, and Yukimura wasn't someone capable of managing people he saw beneath him, and to him that was categorised solely by IQ. To him, someone like Karuizawa was dirt, as he was unable to recognise any value besides intelligence, priding himself so much on his.

"Is there anything else you remember Karuizawa-san? Anything at all?" Kikyou asked her. She had decided that I wasn't going to be getting anywhere with Karuizawa's obvious lack of interest in me. It wasn't that she hated me, or disliked me in any way, but Kikyou was simply a more appealing person for her to talk to, someone she trusted more than me.

"Well, ok, I think I can remember the outcomes Mashima-sensei explained. There were four possibilities, two of them good, and two that made the exam really stupid. Like really, how the hell am I supposed to figure this out now. God, if only I had a better group."

That was all that we would be able to get from Karuizawa for now, but even so it was a good start. I had a pretty clear picture of how the exam worked, and could predict these complex outcomes to a certain degree, since there were only a few possibilities for this sort of game.

Either way, I was finished with this conversation.

"Thanks for explaining all that, Karuizawa. You've been a big help."

She waved it off. Apparently, us calling her here hadn't been a big deal. I was surprised by this, since I had expected her to be busy right now, but perhaps all her friends were in their meetings now. No, that couldn't be right. Maybe she just was that close to Kikyou, although I knew that wasn't correct either. She had a second reason to run to us, and run she had, arriving quite soon after we messaged, and I didn't know what it was.

"Eh, it's fine. Maybe you can use your super brain to win. This really isn't my thing." She got up to leave, but couldn't resist throwing out one final tease. "Sorry for interrupting your date. You really are a cute couple."

Kikyou, ever the collected person under pressure, blew off the situation in the perfect way. If someone accuses you of being attracted to another person, reacting in an extreme manner, denying it vehemently, even if it's not true, will only lead to further teasing and rumours. The best response is to act as if it isn't a problem, and the situation usually blows over.

"We aren't a couple. Kiyotaka-kun is just a good friend of mine."

"Hmm. If you say so Kushida-san."

Apparently, that didn't work in this situation.

As Karuizawa was about to walk away from the table I called out to her on impulse about one last thing.

"Karuizawa. Did you ever find out what happened to your underwear?"

I saw her tense slightly, along with Kikyou. Both of them had reason to be nervous, although I was more interested in how Karuizawa reacted. She turned to me, smile on her face, and her entire body the picture of a care-free student. As I looked closer however, it was clear that her entire body was stiff, her smile strained, her hands clenched into fists.

"Nah, I don't know, we never found them."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry that happened. I had to leave before I got a chance to say so."

Her smile faltered for a moment, before resurfacing, this time in a more genuine manner.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun, but it's not your fault. Don't worry about it, everything sorted itself out. Besides, I know you were busy winning the exam, and I really don't think it was you. You aren't like the other boys."

It was clear that this wasn't a topic she wanted to talk about, even though my words had somewhat found their way into her heart.

"Good night, Karuizawa."

"Bye and thanks for your help, Karuizawa-san!"

With a smile and a wave, she bounced around and made her way out of the store, completely forgetting about the meal that I could be seen being delivered to our table as she moved out of view.

"That was enjoyable wasn't it, Kiyotaka-kun? I always love having a chance to chat with Karuizawa-san."

I had never heard a statement so dripping with sarcasm in my life. It was understandable, since Kikyou had to keep up an appearance, and Karuizwaw was definitely a tough presence to keep a level head around.

"It was certainly informative. We have a pretty good idea of what the exam is now."

"Mhm! Now we just need to double check that with the people in the next group."

It was currently 6:35pm, meaning the second group should almost be finished their session. Luckily, Mei-Yu Wang was in this group, and if there was anyone in the class we could rely upon to remember what happened clearly, it was her.

In the meantime however, I decided it would be a waste to not eat Karuizawa's Penne all'Arrabbiata, and so I picked up my fork, deciding it couldn't hurt to split the plate with Kikyou.

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At 8:30, Kikyou and I made our way to the seond deck, where the private rooms were for our meeting. At this point, we knew almost every detail about the exam, aside from those that could only be really understood in person. Mei-Yu had been very helpful, and so were Mori and Nene, along with my messages to Yukimura asking for him to explain anything they had missed.

It was at the point where I could probably recite the meeting scripted speech along with the teacher.

Aside from that, we had been continually getting lists of students and how they were organised into groups. As the slots began getting taken up, it became more and more obvious that there was a select group of students missing. We hadn't seen the list for the group that was currently on, for obvious reason, but Kikyou knew enough people in those groups to rule them out, leaving our group to contain the leaders of the grade.

We arrived at the room we had been allocated and found Horikita waiting outside the door. This was another person I had calculated to be with us, and while I hadn't told Kikyou, it was likely that she'd figured it out as well, simply because she was one of two people in our class that didn't tell Kikyou her time. Kouenji had gone in earlier.

"Oh. So, you two are in my group."

Horikita had a frown on her face, probably because the two people she disliked the most were in her group. Although, I had a strange feeling that she wouldn't have cooperated with her group members, no matter who they were.

"Hi, Horikita-san! It's been ages since we last had a chance to chat, I'm so glad we're gonna be in a group for the next week."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Ah. She didn't have an information network at all. Even though our class held some newfound respect for her, one on one they weren't likely to offer information, and she wouldn't ask. There was only one person she could possibly have gotten information from.

"I see Sudou is still in his meeting."

"Yes. Unfortunately, I have been unable to learn what is going on. I assume the two of you have some idea, then?"

Kikyou smiled sweetly, although I could see a sadistic glint at beating Horikita at something else.

"We've got a pretty good idea, although it's kinda complex. It'll be explained once we go in."

As Kikyou spoke, the door to our room swung open, and a few class A students made their way out, giving us glares as they did so. Understandable, since we were the ones who crushed them on the island, but it didn't hurt to show some respect.

We entered the room, finding Sakagami to be the teacher leading our meeting. Kikyou phased out during the meeting, since we had heard this exact same speech word for word twice at this point, and then jumbled and butchered once more by Karuizawa. I was also fighting off boredom, but I kept my attention on Sakagami just enough to watch as he delivered the speech. From what I could tell, he wasn't lying or hiding intentions, but simply stating the facts. There was no secret information to derive.

I perked up as he began to speak again, however, reaching the point in his script where he gave the names of our group. This was the only piece of information I needed confirmation on.

"Right now, you shouldn't spend your energy on trying to understand this test. Rather, focus on how to think. Your group assignment is 'Dragon. Here is a list of the members. You will be required to return this list when you leave the room. If you feel it's necessary, I would recommend trying to memorize it now."

He passed over a postcard-sized piece of paper. On it were listed fourteen names of people in our group. As Sakagami had told us, apart from us four, all the others were from Classes A, B, and C.

Class A: Katsuragi Kouhei, Nishikawa Ryouko, Matoba Shinji, Yano Koharu

Class B: Amikura Mako, Andou Sayo, Ichinose Honami, Kanzaki Ryuuji

Class C: Ryuuen Kakeru, Shiina Hiyori, Suzuki Hitedoshi

Class D: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Kushida Kikyou, Horikita Suzune

The leaders of all four classes were indeed in Dragon group. I couldn't believe that was a coincidence, rather the teachers selectively putting the best students of each group together for maximum results. The interesting thing was that Ichinose was among them. While she was definitely a good student in Class B, she was no longer their leader. Perhaps the teachers didn't know about that yet, or perhaps Hoshinomia had put her in for a different reason entirely.

Kikyou and Horikita both had a similar look on their face, of concentration and worry. It was a tough group, if only because Ryuuen was there to cause some chaos. I however, was looking forward to this immensely. I wanted to get a proper read on the minds of my fellow year mates, and a test like this would be the perfect way to learn about them. Who could lie, who could come up with strategies? And if any of them were capable of matching my mind.

The explanation continued on again, and while Kikyou spaced out once more, Horikita continually got more and more worried, trying to balance all the outcomes, rules and intricacies of the exam all at

once. I just sat there, letting Sakagami's words wash over me, as I considered the situation. Outcomes 3 and 4 were almost inevitable for all the groups. Despite how appealing Outcome 1 was, it was virtually unobtainable as a result of human nature. Or was it? There was one way to force Outcome 1, and it was rather simple, but would only work in certain cases. The question was whether anyone else would realise this.

Outcome two wasn't even worth thinking about. If the VIP reached the end of the exam time without being discovered, they would of course prove their identity and ensure they received the million points. If a single group ended in outcome 2 I would be amazed.

The anonymous results was another thing I already knew, but it simply made the exam that much more complex. You could betray your own class, if it came to it, and no one would ever know who it was. Although, due to the rule about no binding contracts during this exam, it would be extremely hard to betray your own class for a promise that could be broken.

Before I knew it, the meeting was over, the explanation exactly the same as before. The only real thing I had wanted to confirm was the names of our group, along with the rules about the emails. It was understandable that we couldn't modify the emails in any way, as that would make the test far too complex for anyone to win. Even creating a new one as a replica with slight changes so it wasn't a copy seemed too close to the rules that I wasn't willing to risk it.

After that, the meeting was over and we were told to leave the room. Kikyou, Horikita and I moved out into the corridor, and tried to leave as fast as possible. I could see the other members of Dragon group leaving their respective meeting rooms and I had no intention of dealing with them now.

"Wait, Ayanokouji-kun. Don't you want to talk about the exam? We need to come up with a plan."

I turned to face Horikita, who had a serious look on her face. Apparently she had every intention of winning this exam, and had focused so much on that idea, that she had missed there was nothing we could do right now.

"What's there to plan? Either we have a VIP or we don't. Until then there's no reason for us to think about it too deeply."

She narrowed her eyes at me, apparently figuring out what I was thinking.

"You already have a plan, don't you? If you want me to be the class leader, then work with me, Ayanokouji-kun. I need to know what's going on."

Did she really not understand? I would be surprised if the girl

known as Horikita hadn't figured out the truth of the situation. No, I suspected she was simply in denial.

"I don't need you to be a leader Horikita. I need you to organise the rabble. I gave you your position so you can do the job I can't be bothered to do. You're our leader in nothing but name, so go do your job and connect with the class."

I turned and walked away, leaving Kikyou alone with Horikita. I could hear the former pestering the latter, offering to help her make friends, asking her out to get a drink with a few people. As always, Kikyou found the perfect way to get on Horikita's nerves, whilst still trying to become her friend. What a devil of a woman.

This exam was proving to be very interesting. Both my group, and the idea as a whole. Now all that mattered was figuring out who the VIP of dragon group was. But, as I said to Horikita, there was nothing to do until tomorrow.

This exam was rather stupid. As it was now, after the island exam, the Class Points had changed significantly:

Class A: 1158 (+70)

Class B: 1178 (+180)

Class C: 817 (+50)

Class D: 540 (+290)

Currently Class B had more points than Class A, but until it was the next month and we returned to school, the standings would remain the same.

This exam had twelve VIP's and if one class managed to find them all and name them, it was possible to gain 600 Class Points, an absurd amount for one exam. Not only that, the classes would swing by 750 Class Points, as the other three classes each lost 150 points each. It was a ridiculous exam, and clearly the teachers assumed that worst case scenario would never occur.

If it did, Class D would become Class A, with 168 points between them and the next class. It was an obscene possibility, and if Class A managed it, as the teachers should assume was possible from the the students they had deemed most capable, it would be virtually impossible to catch up to them. They would receive over 7 million private points each month and could stop an expulsion every four months if they wanted. Such a lead would be unbeatable.

In other words, I couldn't let just one class win the exam. Because where's the fun in that?

Authors Note:

So, as I had Ayanokouji notice, I think the Zodiac exam was rather dumb. Yeah, it's a really cool concept, and out of all the exams they did in the books so far that would be the one I would

probably enjoy the most myself, it has just too high possible rewards for one class to get. No other exam had the posibility of such a swing. For example, the mixed sports event one at the end of year 1, even if you won all seven events, you could only get a swing of 520 between two classes, and that's with complete domination. Really, this exam seems too extreme.

But I digress. This chapter was a lot of setup, preparing for the zodiac exam. A bit of filler, but thats the way it goes before the exams begin. Not much to say, other than here's the current class points. I've been struggling to find a way to fit them into the story, so I tagged them onto the end, just to sate any curiosity.

First time writing Karuizawa since Arc 1 (and I'm trying to forget that garbage) and I'm pretty happy with the result. Also cut out most of the explanation for the exam, since it's rather dull, just an info dump, and most of it had already been explained by Karuizawa's mess of speech. If you need a refresher, hop over to the wiki page and give it a read. Not necessary, since this exam isn't too complex, but it's worth keeping fresh I suppose.

https://you-zitsu.fandom.com/wiki/Cruise_Ship_Special_Test

I just wanted to say, thanks to all of you who stuck around. One weeks break isn't a long one, but it's heartening to see so many people still reading right when I come back. This story is for me, but it's also for you guys. Part of what I believe is when someone starts any task that affects others, it's their obligation to finish it, to pull through as best they can. Of course circumstances can interfere, but imagine if J.K Rowling just stopped writing before deathly hallows, or George R. R. Martin just didn't finish A Song of Ice and Fire (wait, that sounds familiar). It's something I believe is important, that comitment, and so I'll do my best to get this story to it's conclusion, no matter how far away that is. For me and for you all.

Anyways, as always, hope you enjoyed! Banger chapter coming next.

Arc 4 Chapter 3 - Psychological Warfare

Breakfast was a delicious helping of waffles, topped with icecream, strawberries and maple syrup. Once again, I was sharing a meal with Kikyou, who had apparently managed to make time out of her busy friend life to catch up with me. It was 7:58am, and our phones were on the table ready to receive the email from the school about whether we were the VIP of dragon group or not.

"Ah, this ship is amazing! I can't get over this food, how am I going to function when we get back to school. Ugh, it's not fair."

Kikyou was in the middle of devouring a stack of triple chocolate pancakes, topped with chocolate ice cream. How she ate so much and still had a perfect figure was beyond me.

I couldn't argue with her words, though. The food on the cruise was on another level, far beyond what we could get at most of the restaurants at school. There were a few high-class places, but they were frequented mostly by third years, and required booking weeks in advance. For a measly poor first year, a meal there was virtually unobtainable.

"Just out of curiosity, would you rather be the VIP, or not?"

It was an interesting dilemma. A greedy person would choose to be the VIP, drawn to the thought of points, and completely forgetting about the danger they would be in. An overly cautious person would rather not, as being the VIP was balancing a dagger, a dangerous act that would result in a taget on your back. Of course there were several nuances to the situation, and it wasn't as clear-cut as that.

"Hmm. I think I'd like to be the VIP."

That was the answer I had expected. Kikyou wasn't a greedy person, but no one could ignore the potential 1 million points easily. Besides, she was an incredible actor. She could swear black was white and white was black, and most of the grade would take her word. If there was anyone who could get away with being the VIP it would be her.

"What about you?" She turned the question back onto me.

"I'm not sure. I suppose I'd prefer to be the VIP, but either way I'm not too bothered."

Being the VIP would provide a much greater amount of control in the group. It reduced the number of variables to consider, and

allowed one to manipulate the situation, without potentially giving someone else the advantage. Along with that was the private points. I also was unable to disregard the allure of them.

As I was contemplating both choices, our phones buzzed. 8 o'clock. I looked down at the phone in front of me, and read the email from the school on it.

After thorough consideration, you have been chosen to be the VIP. Please remember to be a team player as your group tackles the challenges of this test. The exam begins today, and will be held over a period of three days. Members of the Dragon group should gather in the Dragon room located on the second deck.

The first thing I noticed was the strange wording at the beginning. 'After thorough consideration' indicated there was a method to the VIP selection, confirming a potential theory I had. If I could find enough of the VIP's, it was possible that I could find out the pattern used, and in turn figure out the rest, although I suspected that wouldn't be possible without knowing at least a few from other classes.

"Would you look at that. I guess I'm the VIP."

Kikyou turned her head up from the phone in front of her, looking at the message I was reading, before smirking.

"That makes things easier. If you're the VIP, I don't see how they could ever figure out if you're lying. Do you ever change your face?"

"I just have trouble expressing myself." She hit me right where it hurt. Betrayed, like Ceasar by Brutus, stabbed in the back by my closest confidant.

I finished what I was doing with the phones in front of me, before placing the back on the table, allowing Kikyou to pick up hers and manage the inflow of messages. Soon enough, we had the name of one of our VIP's, Minami Satsuya of Horse group, and assuming there were three in each class in the interest of fairness, we would soon know who.

But as the minutes passed by, and almost everyone had replied to Kikyou, we still didn't know who the third VIP was.

"Someone's lying to you."

She had obviously come to the same conclusion, based on the frown on her face.

"Who could it be then? I don't understand why someone whould hide that they're the VIP from their own class, or even just me."

Ah, yes, by not telling Kikyou at least, they were insinuating they had a reason not to trust her, and that they had a problem with her. I didn't think that was the case though. More likely, they were simply shy, and not brave enough to tell anyone. Whatever their reason, it didn't seem like an attack on Kikyou to me.

"Hey, someone's just asked me who the other VIP's are. Should I tell them that you are one?"

"I don't see why not. It can't hurt, after all."

Even if someone did betray me, it wouldn't be too hard to track them down. Besides, transparency would grow the trust in the class, and I really didn't have a reason to hide my name. It would probably make people in the class more comfortable if they did know I was a VIP, as someone they could somewhat believe in.

In any case, we now had to prepare for our meeting this afternoon.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

Not a moments hesitation. That was the sign of a good pawn.

"When we're in the meeting, just follow whatever I say."

"What are you planning?"

A movie character would give an evil grin right here, with a red glow in their eyes.

"Psychological warfare."

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I made my way into the meeting room just before 1pm, to find that I was the last person to arrive. There was a circle of chairs set up, with only one left empty, between Horikita and Kikyou.

"It's about fucking time. You had me worried I'd be suck here with these boring fucks without anyone to entertain me."

Ryuuen, crass as ever, was the first to notice me as I entered. As he spoke, all heads in the room turned to me, as I moved over to the seat left for me.

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun, you made it!"

Kikyou, bright as ever was the next person to greet me, standing up and pulling out my chair, making it easier to get into the circle. Whoever created the idea of chairs in a circle was never one of the last people to arrive to anything.

Everyone else had various reactions to my arrival. Ichinose and Amikura, the latter of which I didn't know, gave me a friendly smile, along with Shiina from Class C. Ryuuen was cackling to himself over something, Horikita was pointedly ignoring me, and the rest of the students were giving me calculating looks, Katsuragi in particular.

As I was seated, an announcement played over the speakers.

"The first group discussion begins now."

A short, concise announcement. This was a group of class leaders, so I was curious who would take the lead. Most people in here would have been capable of running a group themselves, so it would be interesting to see how many conflicting attempts there

were to assert leadership dominance.

"I suppose I should start this by explaining Class A's stance on this exam."

Katsuragi made an attempt to take the reins, an assert his hold over the group. Despite the fact that she wasn't a leader of Class B anymore, it seemed Ichinose wasn't going to sit out and allow that to happen.

"That's no way to start a meeting Katsuragi-san. Really, we should start by getting to know everyone. I'm sure not everyone has met yet, so we should do our best to get along."

"Kukuku, what a stupid idea. Everyone in this room who's actually gonna do shit this exam already knows everyone." He began pointing from leader to leader. "Class A retard. Class B traitor. Class B ex-leader. Class C king. Class D monster. Class D idiot." The last title was directed towards Horikita.

Everyone in this room who had any real input to the exam should already know that Horikita had nothing to do with Class D's success on the island, instead realising the credit should lie with me. For that reason, I didn't bother correcting him, and Horikita, who seemed to also have realised the same fact, didn't either, despite how much the insult must have affected her fragile ego.

"There's no need to be so rude Ryuuen. I haven't had the chance to meet either of your classmates, and if they're in dragon group with us, I'm sure they aren't idiots."

Kanzaki, the pragmatist, gave a reasonable response to Ryuuen to bail out his classmate.

And so, it was decided to go through introductions in the group. I wasn't particularly bothered by this, on the contrary I didn't really know most of the people in the group, and even though I was the VIP and didn't have to look for them, it didn't hurt to learn more about one's opponents.

"Very well. I am Katsuragi of Class A, and these are my classmates, Nishikawa, Matoba and Yano."

As they were named, each one gave a wave, with varying degrees of interest of what was being said. Nishikawa, out of the three, was the most attentive, as while the other two were paying attention, their attitudes screamed 'I don't care what this man is saying'.

"I am Kanzaki of Class B."

"I'm Ichinose from Class B, I hope we can all get along together!" Ichinose added in her own little flair.

"Hehe, hi everyone, I'm Amikura. Wow, there's a lot of scay people in here."

She was an interesting character. It seemed she was more of a playful person, something I had expected to be common in Class B

but hadn't come across yet. Out of everyone here, she was definitely higher on the list of people I wanted to interact with. Someone less serious than Kanzaki, and potentially willing to take risks more than Ichinose. She was a breath of fresh air into the potential leadership pool. Someone to definitely consider in the future.

"And I'm Andou Sayo." Ah, this was the girl I had named as the leader for Class B on the island in an attempt to gauge their reactions. I hadn't seen anything exceptional from her so far, and the rest of Class B in this group already seemed to be their best line-up, but it would be too early to count her out.

The whole group turned to Ryuuen and his classmates, waiting patiently for him to introduce himself, the next lowest on the totem pole of classes. We sat in silence waiting for him to speak, before eventually he broke.

"Ah fine, why the fuck not. I'm Ryuuen. What is this, kindergarten? She's Shiina, he's Suzuki. Happy?"

Ryuuen wasn't taking this very seriously, although I agreed that this was a very superfluous occurrence. Ichinose, while she may care to be introduced to everyone, was also doing this to learn about us in a small way.

Now the baton had been handed to us, and I left it up to Kikyou to handle the talking for our Class, as Horikita and I weren't very good representatives.

"I'm Kushida Kikyou of Class D. It's great to meet you all, I hope we can all be friends! Beside me is Kiyotaka-kun, and Horikita-san. We're all looking forward to finishing this exam together!" A beautiful speech as always, but I could see most of the group members beginning to look tired of such boring talk.

"Right, now that the pleasantries are out of the way, let me explain Class A's position. We will not be participating in the exam."

Katsuragi finally got his chance to speak and gave us his firm stance.

"Hm? What are you talking about Katsuragi-kun?"

Kikyou began to make her move, inserting herself into the important conversation going on.

"I mean that we will not be speaking. I've decided that the strategy for Class A will be to stay out of the exam. Every group results in Outcome 2, and the only loser is the school. From there, it's up to each individual to decide if they share the points, but as I assume the VIP's are evenly distributed between classes, this is the most achievable outcome."

It was an interesting strategy, but I could see from the looks on peoples faces that almost no one believed him. Of course, if it got to the end of the exam, Class A wouldn't hesitate to use Outcome 2,

but in the meantime, there was no reason to trust what he said. If the VIP came out, they would instantly be betrayed. Katsuragi had the right idea, but the wrong execution. His plan could only work if every other class went along with it. Otherwise, it would be only Class A who lost. He knew that, and we knew he knew that, meaning we know that he knows he can't follow the plan.

It was all a stupid game of we know you know we know, and it would never amount to anything.

Ryuuen had obviously come to the same conclusion as I had, as he started to cackle.

"You moron, you really think anyone here will buy that? Maybe in other groups but we aren't idiots."

"Either way, we will not be speaking."

"But don't you think that option one is a much more desirable goal, Katsuragi-san?"

A silver bell spoke up, the voice of Shiina silencing the room. She had a point. Going for Option 2 was worthless, because it was Option 1 but with less value. There was no reason to hide. And thanks to that, I had my opportunity to freeze the group.

"You aren't wrong, Shiina. Katsuragi had a good idea, but it will never work, for one reason. I'm the VIP."

All eyes turned to me as I said this. Admitting that you were the VIP was the opposite to a reasonable strategy, and for that reason no one had even considered it. But it was the most effective way to force Outcome 1.

"You... what are you saying Ayanokouji?"

Kanzaki couldn't speak in his disbelief for what I just said. Of course, no one would believe it, but that was part of the strategy.

"I'm the VIP for dragon group. To prove this, I'll first have Kikyou and Horikita show you their emails from the school to prove they aren't."

I looked at the two girls sitting on either side of me. Kikyou, my loyal partner, acted hesitant for a moment, before bringing out her phone and showing the group the negative email. Horikita instead gave me a flustered look. She had heard from Kikyou that I was the VIP, and was currently running through hundreds of scenarios, trying to figure out how this would help the class.

"Horikita-san?"

Ichinose called her name, trying to hurry her up. After a moment's consideration, she steeled herself and pulled out her own phone, displaying another negative email.

"It's clear now that Horikita-san and Kushida-san are not the VIP. This in turn doesn't prove that you are, unless you foolishly intend to show us your email?"

Nishikawa spoke up, with a reasonable question. She spoke in a refined, processed manner, one befitting of Class A, and from what I could tell was one of Katsuragi's last supporters. It was fortuitous that she was in this group with him.

"No, I won't be showing you my phone. But either way, now there is no possibility but Outcome 1. I don't believe anyone here is foolish enough to submit my name without proof, and you won't be getting any. Conversely, you can't prove that I'm not the VIP.

"If I really am the VIP, then no one else can come out pretending to be one. If, let's say, Ichinose pretends to be the VIP and her name gets submitted, that's still a positive outcome for me. If I'm not the VIP, all I have to do is figure out who the real VIP is and submit their name, confident that it's not me."

Ryuuen, the bravest soul in the room, began typing on his phone, holding it up to show everyone. The name 'Ayanokouji Kiyotaka' was typed out in a draft email to the submission address.

"And what if I submit your name right now? Are you really that confident I won't?"

I stared him down, looked him right in the eyes. No, Ryuuen was bluffing. He wouldn't send the email now, because despite his desire to win, he's not an idiot.

"Go ahead. Are you confident I'm not lying?"

My face was unreadable, and this was one of the times I was quite happy with that. They could never get a reaction out of me.

"Unless you want to be the Class Leader who lost Dragon group, there's nothing to do but sit here until the end, when I will prove myself to be the VIP, and we can secure Outcome 1."

Shiina put her hand on Ryuuen's shoulder to give him a warning, and while he brushed it off, everyone saw him delete the draft as he leaned back in his chair, relaxing once again, enjoying what I had just done in his own way.

This time it was Matoba's turn to ask a question.

"This can only work if you're confident that your class has the VIP. Just by doing this, you're proving that it must be one of you, and we know that Kushida and Horikita aren't the VIP."

"Are you willing to risk it on just that?"

And no, from the looks in the eyes of everyone in the room, it was clear there was no one bold enough to do so. It wasn't being brave, it was taking an unnecessary risk, very early into the exam. Not only would it be damaging to make a mistake, but everyone in the grade would also hear about how one of their leaders got cocky and lost their Class 50 points.

I had been waiting for a question like that though. Before Matoba had brought that up, it was possible I was just bluffing, and there

was a ¼ chance it was a different Class who had the VIP. But now it had been made clear my strategy would only work if the VIP was a Class D student, they now had to figure out if I really was the VIP, if one of my classmates was somehow the VIP, or if I really was bluffing, which was seeming less and less likely.

Most of the group was sitting in silence, trying to figure a way out of the iron lock I had on the group. It was now impossible to progress, or even have a chance to figure out who the VIP was, since all the evidence pointed to me, even though my admitting of that made it impossible.

The silence was broken by a small giggle.

I turned my head to find it was Amikura who had laughed. She had her hand over her mouth, trying to stop any more laughter come out, but her shaking shoulders showed that she found the entire situation hilarious. Not in the way Ryuuen did, as a savage brutal enjoyment, but genuine hilarity in how much of a bind I had them all in.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. It's just... hahaha... it took you three minutes, to completely win this group. It's crazy, I mean when Honami-chan told me about you I knew you were impressive, but... hahaha. The best our grade has, and you beat us all in moments. It's really embarrassing."

I leaned back in my chair, my work for the week done. All I had to do now in every meeting was give nothing away, and insist I was the VIP, all the while halting all progress.

"All I want is Outcome 1, for obvious reasons. Feel free to talk amongst yourselves, but I'm going to be following Katsuragi's example from now on."

I had spoken a lot already, and it was only a few minutes into the meeting. It was uncharacteristic of me, sure, but I had to spell out the situation. It was a complex trap I had come up with, and if I didn't explain it well enough, it was always possible that one of the less crafty students here could accidentally miss it and submit my name. I wasn't going to be beaten because my opponents were too stupid.

Suddenly, though, a phone started ringing. I looked to my right, and saw it was Kikyou's, still lying on her lap from earlier. She picked it up to see who it was, and I was surprised to see the caller ID was 'Ichinose Honami'. The call was cancelled moments after, before Horikita's phone began to ring. Sure enough, it was a call from the same person.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to distrust you, but I just wanted to make sure."

"Make sure of what," questioned Kikyou?

"You two are very close. It would be understandable if you switched phones. That gets around the no changing the email rule, after all. But no, those phones and emails really are Kushida-san's and Horikita-san's."

Ichinose drooped, her face the shape of confusion. Obviously, she had thought she was onto something there, and it was a reasonable assumption. I was glad someone else had brought it up. It was something I had wanted to address but was unable to without raising suspicion on the phones myself.

With that, my work was done. I had nothing more to offer this group, having stopped all possible progress. It was up to the rest of the members to push the group forward, and I was curious to see what they would come up with.

"Is it really so bad to accept Outcome 1? I suppose if we have half the group intent on achieving it, there's not a lot we can do about it."

Kanzaki finally said something that everyone had considered. It was significantly harder to progress in this situation, so perhaps it would be best to embrace the inevitable.

"If you really want this over so badly, go ahead and submit a name. I'm quite happy with how this all played out."

Ryuuen, of course, refused the cowards way out, intending to fight to his last as the exam continued. Despite this firm opinion, however, the group slowly devolved, the tight knit that Ichinose had formed dissolved now that there was no clear way to proceed. It was likely to remain in this state, at least until the next meeting, when everyone had a chance to rethink their strategies.

None of the people in Dragon group were stupid, or foolish, by any means. I was sure almost everyone had come in with a plan, some preparation, that they were confident would give them an advantage over everyone else.

Ichinose tried to form a close bond with everyone, to get to know them better: this was intended to help Class B figure out who was the most likely to lie.

Katsuragi had his own strategy, an inferior version of what I had devised. It would have worked, to an extent, but the group would still have been able to make progress in their discussions, albeit slowly.

None of these were viable anymore, at least without some modifications. It would take the break, a chance for the classes to regroup before they could again try to prove whether or not I was the VIP.

I wasn't expecting much of that to happen, however. The sharpest in the group would recognise this as a fruitless attempt. No, they

would turn their complete focus to the other 11 groups, attempting to find a way to win them.

As it was, they would have done the same before my speech, but also had to juggle this group. Now, people like Ryuuen, Katsuragi and Kanzaki could focus all their attention on winning the other groups, negating the loss I had created here.

Sacrificing a lost cause was a valid strategy, and the best choice in this situation. The only obstacle they faced now was that I could do the same.

The race for the rest of the VIP's was on, but unlike my opponents, I had a secret weapon.

My thoughts were broken when someone moved their chair over to sit with me. People had been moving around the room, and Kikyou had left me at some point while I was lost in my thoughts, moving over to talk to the Class A students in a futile attempt to get them to participate. Horikita had moved her chair into the corner, and was doing her best to ignore Ryuuen getting on her nerves.

No, sitting in front of me was none other than Shiina Hiyori.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun, do you mind?" She gestured at the spot in front of me where she was moving her chair.

"Not at all."

And so I was faced with a silver-haired beauty, with angel like features, serving the devil of our year, here to tempt me into revealing my secrets.

"I must say I was incredibly impressed with your strategy, Ayanokouji-kun. It was marvelous, like something out of a mystery."

"I've read a lot of mystery books as a kid, so part of it came from that. It's natural I suppose to be influenced by what I read."

At my words, her eyes widened, shining with excitement.

"You like to read?"

"I suppose."

She clasped her hands together, staring directly into my eyes. This conversation had taken a turn I had not expected, and while I was still on guard, it seemed she had dropped hers entirely, forgetting about the exam at the excitement of finding someone who liked to read.

"I read a lot of books, but my favourite are mystery novels. I guess that's why I wanted to talk to you, what you did seemed like a character come to life. An Agatha Christie story, where everything comes together, or... I'm sorry, I got too excited for a moment there. I haven't met anyone else at this school who enjoys reading yet, so I'm afraid I overreacted."

"No, you don't have to apologise. I was wondering why you ended

up in dragon group, but now I know. You were the one who helped Ryuuen plan on the island, weren't you?"

Something about the situation struck me as odd. Ryuuen was not the sort of person to consider allowing anyone else to be the leader, but even so, he still made Kaneda the leader of Class C. I had finally found the external influence on him, who convinced him to take such a clever strategy: someone who enjoyed mystery novels to the nth degree and was smart enough to apply them.

"Hehe, yes, I was the one who helped Ryuuen plan on the island. Even so, it didn't matter. You figured out my strategy."

That was no reason for her to put herself down. Shiina had come up with an admirable addition to the plan and did more than Class A or B did in any case.

"That doesn't discount the strategy. It was a stroke of luck that I found Kaneda asleep, if not you might have succeeded."

A wistful look overcame her face, as she contemplated what might have been.

"Ah, he's quite smart, but Kaneda isn't considered very wise. It was a stupid mistake he made, I guess."

She was incredibly blunt too. Brutal kind honestly, that was the best way I could sum up this girl.

Her motives for talking to me had in no way been pure. She had opened the conversation with a compliment, in an attempt to butter me up, before proceeding to attempt a segue into a hidden line of questioning for me. I had been able to divert the conversation away from the exam, to hide my intentions just a little longer, but it wasn't foolproof.

Shiina was an intelligent girl, someone who had read quite a few novels, and understood how to speak. I suppose I wouldn't mind spending the hour debating with her.

Authors Notes:

Right, so I was super fucking proud of this chapter, namely Ayanokouji's strategy in his group. I was eating a Whopper, and came up with the idea, then spent a few hours refining it with my beta, figuring out every possible escape or flaw in his plan. If you can figure something out, do tell, because I'd like to know just how good this strategy is.

Shiina finally has a role to play. I don't believe I've explained why she's more involved now, but that is coming in an upcoming chapter. She has a good reason that I invented and it gave me a chance to add her into the mix of characters I'd like to learn about.

A couple of things to address from the last chapter. First, Mori and Nene. I was so fucking proud of myself at 3am for remembering

two different classmates, and as soon as someone commented they're the same person I actually wanted to end myself. However, I will not be changing mistakes like these in the story. Only twice have I edited a chapter after uploading it, and both of those were to fix continuity errors in the story. All of my mistakes, flaws and such, I can remember every single time someone has made a comment, and I've had to rethink something. They're important memories, and I believe holding onto those mistakes is improving me as an author, so I will not be fixing them up.

That's not to say don't point them out, for the love of god shit on me, it's always hilarious to find when I've fucked up something like 'KaruizaUwU'.

Also, my favourite meal is spaghetti and meatballs. I seem to have offended an italian, and I apologise, but I will use an entire garlic next time I make them. Fuck you. J.k it's always cool to learn more. My current knowledge is 'spaghetti is italian therefore entire meal is italian QED'.

As always, hope you enjoyed! I had a super giga brain moment on my night IGA run just now, so I'm gonna see if I can work that into the plot (for a later arc), but thats all for now. See you next time!

Arc 4 Chapter 4 - Movements

The first group meeting was almost over, and I had spent the entire time in conversation with Shiina.

It turned out that not only was she a fan of mystery novels, but romance was also a genre that excited her greatly. It was clear from our chat just how passionate she was about her books, whilst simultaneously trying to hold herself reserved as to not seem too weird and push away the first person who shared her interest.

While I had learned she hadn't made any friends in her class yet, she wasn't hiding in obscurity either. For Ryuuen to be willing to take advice from anyone was something I hadn't expected, meaning he had recognised her potential when she provided him with a suggestion.

She wasn't a leader, that much I could tell. She didn't have the personality for it. But Class C only had one leader: Ryuuen, and hence it was his support crew that joined him in Dragon group. That was Shiina's role. She wasn't a leader, but she was sharp.

Even though she was genuinely excited to make a friend in me, I could tell she was still wary, and had been probing me for information the entire time.

There had been a few attempts so far to reignite discussion in the group, but every time so far they had been shot down by someone else. I had nothing to do, but sit hear and watch as plausible ideas had been thrown around, and allowed someone else to do my job and continue the stalemate.

The announcement came that we were free to go, and everyone began to wrap up their conversations. The Class A students got up immediately and moved out of the room as fast as possible not talking to anyone at all. They had ignored any attempts at conversation from anyone outside their class, and were clearly sticking with that plan for now.

"It was a pleasure to finally meet you, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm looking forward to the next meeting. I'll bring along some of my books for you to borrow, if you'd like."

"I'd appreciate that."

This ship didn't have a proper library, and I had already read through the materials I had brought. A breath of fresh air would be a nice break from the impending monotony of the cruise.

She followed the rest of Class C out, leaving just Kikyou, Horikita and I in the room. Once it was quiet, I was approached by the black-haired girl, a stormy look on her face.

"We need to talk."

I considered her demand for a moment, before deciding it wasn't any trouble.

"I suppose we do. But I haven't eaten yet, so it'll have to be over lunch."

She sighed, apparently willing to make that sacrifice if it meant getting answers.

"Fine."

"Yay! I finally get to have lunch with you Horikita-san!" Kikyou invited herself along to our lunch. I had no problem with it, but...

"Excuse me? This is between Ayanokouji-kun and myself. I don't see a reason for you to be there."

"That's a rather limited understanding, Horikita. Kikyou is necessary for us to work with the class. I need her to be on the same page, so that everything goes according to plan."

My reply got a beaming smile of gratitude from Kikyou, and a frown of annoyance from Horikita, but there was nothing she could do about it. If she wanted to talk to me, she would also have to put up with Kikyou.

"Alright. Just this once, and only because we need to plan, will I allow it."

Apparently, we needed to plan. I hadn't realised it, but if Horikita said we needed to then we would.

And so, we made our way to the buffet lunch, which was mercifully quiet at 2:15 in the afternoon. Most people had eaten earlier, so it was no trouble to find a booth in the back, and after loading up a plate of potato skins, I sat down with the two girls, ready to ignore Horikita and enjoy my food.

"What the hell are you thinking."

I looked up at her, not sure what she was talking about. Kikyou also bore a confused look on her face, and at the same time took the opportunity to steal one of my potato skins.

"What are you talking about?"

"Telling everyone you're the VIP."

I didn't see what she wanted me to explain. I thought I had made everything clear in the meeting. It was more disbelief that drove her question than a lack of understanding.

"No one can turn traitor in the group, at least not to submit my name. I'm sure they'll keep looking for the VIP, but I've made it impossible to confirm it's me or clear my name."

"It was a stupid risk. What if Ryuuen had submitted your name

after all? Where would we be then."

"We'd probably lose the group."

"And you didn't think of that?!"

She was getting progressively louder with every answer I gave. My lack of concern seemed to incite hers even further.

"I'm sure Kiyotaka-kun knows what he's doing. I trust him, Horikita-san, and you should too."

Kikyou voiced her advice, something that Horikita almost certainly didn't want to hear. She was shot a dirty look, before the glare returned to me.

"I'm fully aware just how competent you are. That's doesn't mean your actions weren't reckless. Overconfidence is an easy mistake to make after repeated success."

"Something you would know all about, I'm sure."

Horikita winced at my words, but they were true. It was all an assumption, but I couldn't think of any way for Horikita to create such a superiority complex without having repeatedly been better than everyone around her. It was that attitude that led to her failing on the island.

She took a moment to recollect herself, before continuing. I had to admire that tenacity.

"At least let me know what you're planning. Kushida-san obviously already knew, but I could have given away something in my surprise at your words. If you want your plan to go well, then you need to let me in."

"Actually, Horikita, that's the end of my plan."

"Wait, what?"

This entire conversation had been a pointless endeavour. As far as Dragon group was concerned, I had nothing else planned.

"Yeah, I don't particularly care what happens any more, so I'm just going to watch what happens."

"Do you intend to take this seriously?"

"Not at all. It's no fun that way."

Her head dropped into her hands, as she processed the insanity of what I had just suggested.

"Unbelievable. The most important role goes to the most unreliable person ever."

"When have I ever given you cause to rely on me."

It seemed she needed a reminder.

"No, that was my mistake. I suspected you would at least show an interest in gaining points for yourself, but even that was a miscalculation."

"There's no need to be so down, Horikita-san. I'm sure everything will work out fine."

Horikita gave me one last look of distain before turning to Kikyou.

"I don't know what kind of relationship the two of you have, but I'd advise you to stay away from this man. Whatever you might think, he's dangerous. You can't trust him."

With her final warning an attempt to save Kikyou from me, she left the table, and soon after the restaurant, having no interest in furthering this doomed conversation.

I looked down at my plate, to find most of my potato skins were gone. The culprit was sitting next to me and had been sneaking them constantly throughout the conversation without my notice.

"Seriously, we're in an all you can eat. If you want some you can get your own."

"Then it shouldn't be too hard for you to get some more," she replied in a sing-song voice, teasing my poor situation. "Are you really going to give up though?"

"There's actually not much I can do, in regards to Dragon group at least. The ball is in their court, and now it's my job to react on the fly. I'm improvising. It's like jazz."

She relaxed at my words, assuaging her concerns that I was going to abandon everything now. There really wasn't anything I could do, since I couldn't predict accurately how my group members would all react. No, I was in a strong position, and all I had to do was hold it.

"Well, it was just as impressive as I had imagined. Really, psychological warfare was a pretty good description. I was confused a bit, and I know all the details. To think I ever thought you couldn't lead a conversation."

"I can lead a conversation just fine, I'm just not comfortable doing so," I replied, a little miffed at her lack of faith in me.

I had simply never had an interest in taking a frontal position before. It hadn't been necessary until now.

I went and grabbed a second plate of potato skins, as well as a helping of watermelon. I probably wouldn't get to eat all of this, most of it being stolen by the demon sitting at my table, but I could always get more.

Eventually she would get full, right?

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We hadn't been there long when two unexpected people made their way over to our table.

"Do you mind if we sit?"

Ichinose and Amikura, two of the four Class B members in Dragon group, had found us on our lunch date.

"Ah, Ichinose-san, Amikura-san! Yeah, sure, it's great to see you."

We had left the meeting not half an hour ago, yet Kikyou was greeting them as if we hadn't seen them in years. After receiving her permission, the two of them pulled up the two remaining chairs of our table and took a seat in front of us.

"Why are you here?"

I got straight to the heart of the matter. I wasn't in the mood for superfluous niceties, and neither of these people had a reason to interact with me. The disgraced former leader of Class B, and her fascinating friend.

"Is it possible that I just wanted to catch up with my friends?"

"Not at all."

Perhaps if there hadn't been an exam on, I would have believed it, but right now, there was not a single person with pure motives.

"You've seen though my devious plan," she said with a smile. Obviously, she had no malicious intent, and was clearly coming to meet with me for a purpose, and I didn't hold it against her.

"We didn't really get a chance to talk to you in the meeting. I wanted to meet you personally, and Honami-chan, well, I'll let her speak."

"Well, do you want to grab some food then?" Kikyou offered to share a meal with them, but both of them were already shaking their heads.

"No thanks, I don't think we'll be long. But really, I can't believe you kept hidden for so long, Ayanokouji-kun. I knew you were smart, but to think there's someone as capable as you in Class D, well, it just makes everything much more interesting."

Amikura provided me with her reaction to my presence in the school. It wasn't an unusual one, and one that most people had had so far, but there was something different about her. It wasn't so much caution, but more excitement, tending in the direction of Ryuuen. She was an unknown quantity, not taking a center stage in Class B so far, but an interesting combination of Katsuragi and Ryuuen.

"You too have remained relatively unobtrusive, yet here you are taking a step forward."

"Mhm, it is strange. All I can think is that something changed in Class B that made you want to do something. You seem different from the Amikura-san at school." Kikyou gave her own analysis, pointing out exactly what was so strange about the situation.

"Ehe, well I haven't had a reason until now to bother. I was pretty happy with Kanzaki-kun and Honami-chan running Class B together, but now that someone," she glared at me as she said this, "has broken them apart, well I'm not too comfortable leaving everything up to Kanzaki-kun."

"You mean to lead the class yourself, then."

She nodded, although what I had said wasn't quite her intentions.

"Not alone of course, but I can't leave my future at this school to anyone else. It would be irresponsible to let Kanzaki-kun drive us off a cliff, and besides, it's so much more fun being a leader."

She giggled a little, giving the image that Amikura was a little more unhinged than the rest of her class. A better term was that she had an open mind, not content to trust in their class unity.

"And you're OK with this, Ichinose-san? Don't you think you did a good job?"

"The reason Mako-chan is doing this is because I failed," Ichinose smiled bitterly. "It's not my place to stop her, and besides, I think she's competent enough."

So, Amikura was making a bid for Class B, in direct opposition to Kanzaki. So far, they clearly didn't have many supporters, but Ichinose had decided she was worth supporting. The two of them working together could be a formidable team, so I was interested in where this new candidate would go from here.

"I'm shocked Ichinose-san. You're betraying Kanzaki-kun, just to be leader?"

"I'm betraying him for the good of my class. After the island exam I was content to let him be the sole leader, but I've been watching him this exam, and he has no idea what he's doing."

Ichinose didn't look happy saying this. It went against her own ideals, but she had made the choice to prioritise the many over the few. That choice was interesting, and something I hadn't expected. It seemed her experience at failing had changed her.

That Kanzaki was struggling didn't surprise me though. He was a strategist, a planner, who was willing to make sacrifices and take risks. This exam was full of those opportunities, yes, but a key component was communication. Out of everyone in Class B, he was the person least connected. He could come up with a plan, a strategy, but getting people to execute it relied upon not just trust but the ability to communicate it. Kanzaki seemed to be failing in that regard.

"So what do you want with us?"

"Actually, Kushida-san, we wanted to speak to Ayanokouji-kun alone, if you wouldn't mind."

It was a blunt thing to say, but there was no easy way to say get lost. Kikyou looked over to me questioningly, but I gave her a nod. It was fine. I didn't need here to listen to the inner workings of my plans, to know all the schemes that went on around me. As long as she cooperated, I couldn't care less.

"Alright then. I'll see you three at the meeting this evening."

A smile and a wave, and then my only ally was gone out the door, leaving me left with two devious minds from Class B.

We were left alone at the table, with almost no one in the buffet by now. There was a couple on the other side of the restaurant, and a few groups of students dotted around, but other than that it was empty. No one would overhear this conversation.

"So. What is it that you want."

I had no idea what they could want. There were more and less likely possibilities of course, but it all came down to what these two girls prioritised.

"A trade. We'll give you the name of one of Class B's VIP's."

Amikura made the straightforward offer.

There was a lot to take in from just that one statement. First there was the implication that I would value the name of a VIP, although that was fairly obvious, as a legitimate VIP was worth quite a lot.

Next there was the idea that they would betray their class on this exam. It was hard to believe, especially since there was no way to enforce a contract, but in this case I did. Amikura, if not Ichinose, wanted Kanzaki to falter here. She knew he wouldn't do well on this exam, but wanted to ensure he did badly enough that she could step up and lead the class. It seemed she had recognised I was a good starting point for such a scheme, having successfully done it to Ichinose already.

Lastly, there was the word 'we'. She was clearly showing that the two of them were in it together, and that despite Ichinose's potential reservations, and how this went against what most people thought of her, this was something they had both accepted.

All of these thoughts ran through my head in an instant after Amikura made the offer. There was only one thing missing.

"And what do you get in return?"

What could I have that they would value to sabotage their own class? It was something unrelated to the exam most likely, because giving an opponent an advantage just to secure one yourself was a stupid move, unless you knew just how your opponent would use the advantage. They had no idea what I would do with the name.

"One favour."

Ah.

"To be redeemed at a later date, I'm sure."

"I see you understand the situation." Amikura gave me a smile, glad I had caught on quick.

I would become indebted to the two of them. It wasn't a terrible situation, but it would constrain my actions severely in the future, having to consider when they would cash in on the debt.

I wasn't going to bother with stupid questions like 'how do I know

what you're telling me is true'. They clearly wanted this deal to succeed, and in the event that they betrayed me, they wouldn't get a favour in return. No, the information they told me would be correct.

"You understand that nothing we say here is binding, right? I could turn around and pretend this never happened."

"I don't think you'll go back on your word Ayanokouji-kun. You're many things, but I don't think that you're a cheat." Ichinose spoke up for the first time in a while.

"I'll agree, on one condition. In the next group meeting, ensure that nothing happens."

I had figured out one possible way for the group to make progress, and at least for today I wanted to ensure that didn't happen.

"You want to keep your stalemate. Fair enough. We'll help you with that, as long as you target Class A."

"I'll need your help at one point to do so, but it won't be much."

"Done."

"Done."

I shook her hand, before also shaking Ichinose. This was an arrangement based completely on honesty, but for some reason I trusted the two girls before me not to betray me.

"The VIP of Cow group is Kobashi Yume of Class B. We'll do our best to make sure nothing gets decided tonight."

"Thank you. I'll let you know what I need you to do to target Class A. And if you haven't lied to me, I'll owe you a favour."

Amikura leaned forward, looking at me intently.

"What do you intend to do? Care to fill in your new partners?"

"Nothing for now. Once this exam is over, you'll see what I see. Don't worry, I'll ensure that Class A comes in last place."

She leaned back, apparently satisfied with my answer.

I was satisfied with this situation myself. I had obtained a valuable piece of information, and was now shackled to the biggest unknown factor in the grade right now. It was a new experience, being in debt to someone else, but like everything, I was sure I could turn it to my advantage.

"It was a pleasure to meet you Amikura. It was good to see you again Ichinose."

"Likewise, Ayanokouji-kun." She had been quiet for most of our conversation, most likely still debating whether this was the right decision, but Ichinose was always conscious to be courteous.

"See you in the next meeting, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll ensure it runs like my asshole after eating spicy food: hot flowing shit."

"Mako-chan! That's disgusting!" Ichinose smacked Amikura for

her awful joke, the latter cackling away at her own humour. I was glad to see this interaction. It confirmed my feelings that Amikura wasn't just someone aiming to win; she was in this for fun as well.

Perhaps I should set her up with Ryuuen. I wonder who would eat who.

Authors Notes:

Bit of a shorter chapter this time, but it achieved what I wanted. I can't find a lot on Amikura, so I'm going to be rolling with her as sort of an OC. She's going to be a somewhat important character continuing on, and that will hopefully be evident in the next chapter too.

It's really fucking hard to write the group discussions. I havent finished the next chapter yet, and while I will have it done by the next scheduled upload, it's a struggle. There's a lot of characters to juggle, and all the arguments have to be high level and reasonable. It's a work in progress, and I'm doing everything I can to make it good enough for you all.

Ayanokouji dismissing Kushida here is something I was debating but eventaully went with. As someone who's never had a proper friend or been able to connect and trust someone like he has with her, he's not quite sure how to go about it. Yes, he's getting closer to her, closer than anyone else in his life, but that's also something he's uncomfortable with, and I imagine he might retreat a little into familiar territory somewhat, holding her a little at arms length. Sharing everything with someone else isn't something he's comfortable with, especially with someone as untrustworthy as her, so he should be hesitant to go along with that.

Kushida is going through something similar, but I have a special time to address that, as I mentioned in the previous Island arc.

On an unrealted note I finally got around to watching Death of Stalin. Fucking hilarious, highly recommend, as long as you don't mind mild gore, swearing and generally distasteful concepts. In other words it was exactly my thing.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 5 - Machinations

The second discussion of the first day had begun. Every member of Dragon group had returned to the meeting room and were sitting in the stupid circle of chairs.

This time however, I had found time to eat before-hand, not that I didn't have an abundance of time on my hands anyway, and was content to sit and rest in a post-feast coma whilst the rest of the group battled it out.

Ever since my conversation with Amikura and Ichinose, there had been only one way this group would go tonight.

Katsuragi and Class A would refuse to speak. This was a given, unless there was some external change that made it worth them entering discussion.

Ryuuen I wasn't sure about, but I suspected he would be targeting me directly. He had made it clear on the island that I was his opponent, and while there wasn't much to do in this group, he could still find ways to cause me problems. The rest of Class C would follow his lead.

It was Kanzaki who would cause the biggest problems. He wasn't one to sit around and lose, and so he would also find the same method as Ryuuen. Luckily, I had Amikura and Ichinose to hinder his progress.

"I'd like to start this meeting off by trying to figure out who the VIP is."

And as predicted, Kanzaki tried to take control of the situation.

"Are you stupid? What's there to figure out, we all know it's Ayanokouji," exclaimed Suzuki.

"I'm not so sure. Logically, all evidence points to him being the VIP, but it could be a double bluff in order to force Outcome 1. There's no evidence that actually implicates him, in fact it's still just as likely that anyone else here is the VIP."

"And what the fuck do you think we should do about it then?" Asked Ryuuen, seeming interested in where this was going.

Kanzaki leaned forward, a fierce expression on his face.

"I know that the VIP isn't in my class. For that reason, I propose that everyone shows the emails they received from the school."

There it was, the one way to force progress. I had opened myself

up to this risk by getting Horikita and Kikyou to show theirs, but it was a necessary risk to take in order to get the group to believe that in my class, I was the highest chance of being the VIP.

Speaking of Horikita, as Kanzaki continued to speak, I could see her getting more and more nervous, witnessing my plan unravel before her eyes, the entire group coming crashing down to our defeat.

But it wasn't a concern.

"If Ayanokouji really is the VIP, then we will all know. If he isn't we'll find out who the real VIP is. I don't see a downside." Kanzaki had continued his argument, but he had made a fatal error in his wording. His last sentence had doomed his proposal, and it wouldn't even need my help to sabotage this.

"You claim there isn't a downside, Kanzaki-kun. But wouldn't it be harmful for any other class who is potentially hiding a VIP? From what you've said, it's as if the only result you care about is your own class, yet you pretend to be working in the groups interests. It's a reasonable stance to take, especially since I am also working for my own classes interests, but I'd appreciate it if you were honest about your intentions next time."

I had never heard such destructive words from such an angelic person. Shiina tore Kanzaki to shreds. Really, she had no reason to interfere, since she would most likely know that the VIP also wasn't in her class, but it seemed she had genuinely taken offense at his underhanded exploitation of the group.

"You would leave the group in stalemate over impure intentions? As it stands, your opposition to the idea of sharing our emails only makes it more suspicious for the VIP to be in Class C."

"I suppose it does. But you too don't seem to be very forthcoming with your emails."

Their banter had been continuing back and forth for some time now, and it seemed that despite his position on not interrupting the group, he could no longer idly watch.

"Kanzaki, your proposal is flawed, as Shiina-san has explained. By forcing the group to reveal their emails, you are inadvertently putting someone at a disadvantage, whilst suffering none yourself. In fact, you would be in the prime position to take the advantage of submitting the leaders name."

Kanzaki narrowed his eyes, now on the defence from attacks from two separate classes.

"You've made it perfectly clear that you won't be participating in the conversation, yet here you are, arguing a point. Very well, Class B will go first, at least to assuage any concerns."

"No."

The word was issued not loudly, but boldly and firm, a clear and strong decision to Kanzaki's order.

The entire group turned to Amikura, everyone surprised at her blunt refusal to cooperate with her class leader.

Even I was shocked by her actions, despite knowing ahead of time that she would be attempting to slow down the process of the group. No, this was far too irrational, and far too soon. If she wanted to assert her place in the class, it wouldn't be successful if it was known she had caused Kanzaki's downfall. This was a mistake on her part.

Ichinose seemed to have realised it too, her head darting to Amikura, shock on her features.

"Kanzaki-kun, Mako-chan is right. It's too soon in the group to do this. We still have 6 more meetings after tonight. There's no reason to give up our advantage now," Ichinose argued, desperate to make up for Amikura's slip.

"Our advantage? Do you want to leave us in this stalemate?"

Amikura took a moment pretending to think about the situation, although I was sure she had already considered this eventuality and her response.

"Hmm, no, I don't want the group to end like this. But it's far too early to force the endgame right now, and I'm assuming that Class A won't cooperate anyway."

She glanced over to Katsruagi, who gave her a nod of agreement.

"As it stands, we know for a fact that two people aren't the VIP's. Seven more of us, at least, will be refusing to show our emails. All that leaves is the two of you to give up any leverage Class B had."

"It strikes me as odd, Amikura-san, that you're so against showing us your email. Perhaps it truly is you who is the VIP, and not Ayanokouji-kun."

Shiina re-entered the conversation, posing a question right back at Amikura. It was a valid one, as only the VIP should have a reason to hide emails, along with their class.

"Hmm, perhaps I am Shiina-san. But, again, I'm not going to prove it one way or another." She paused. "At least not yet."

And there it was, the implication that while for now, she would assist in tying up the group discussion, sooner or later we would be forced into revealing all our emails. Right now, I held the advantage, but so did everyone else by still having cards to play.

And eventually the group would be forced to play them. What mattered was making my move before I was inevitably submitted as the VIP.

The group was left in a resounding silence after Amikura's final words, once again unsure how to proceed. Forcing the reveal of all

the emails was the obvious solution, and Kanzaki had quickly come to assume it was the only way forward, confident the rest of the group would be on his side, or at least his classmates.

Ryuuen too, had probably expected things to proceed in this manner, given his lack of efforts to stop it.

"Does anyone really think we can discover the VIP through discussion though? It seems unlikely that anyone is going to slip up, and unless we reveal our emails there isn't any way to actually confirm the result." Andou provided her support for Kanzaki, speaking up for the first time tonight.

"You really think no one will fuck up? Then why did I hear that most Class A students are working in their groups. Explain that one, Baldy."

Ryuuen mentioned something I hadn't yet heard. It seemed Kikyou either didn't know, or hadn't informed me, although I suspected it was the former. There wasn't a reason for anyone to mention that the Class A students were cooperating, and so any report that we would have found out of the ordinary being in Dragon group, was the complete opposite for most of our classmates.

In any case the news hadn't reached me. I wasn't surprised though. After his spectacular failure on the Island, I didn't think it was likely that the Class would follow his lead. I didn't think there was a new leader, especially since Katsruagi was an honourable sort of man, and I didn't think he would deceive or lie to us about such a thing. No, most of his classmates had simply refused to obey his orders and gone to do their own thing.

"Yes. The majority of my class has made the choice to decide how they tackle this exam themselves. However, that will not change how Nishikawa, Matoba, Yano and I present ourselves in this group. We will remain silent as much as is reasonably possible."

The three other members of Class A declared their support for him, but none of us truly believed it. His original strategy had potential, but only in so far as the rest of his class cooperated. Now that it was only this group, he stood to gain nothing here, while the rest of his class floundered about unguided.

Of course, they were Class A students, and didn't have their placement for nothing. I was sure they could conduct themselves with a reasonable manner in this exam without guidance, but there was no longer a clear concise strategy governing Class A, and that was a weakness.

That wasn't the main thing to take from this situation though. Since his plan had fallen through, it was a mistake to continue his strategy of silence. I doubted he was the stubborn type, or one to

give in to his pride, but I honestly didn't understand the man well enough to predict his reasons just yet. The only thing I would have to consider was what he could do instead, if he did change his plan.

If he really was going to continue as he was, then there was not much to be concerned about from Class A.

"I have a suggestion. Since it's clear we won't be getting much further in identifying the VIP this session," and at her words Kanzaki gave her a look of frustration, since it had been her and Amikura who stood in his way, "how about a game of cards?"

She held up a new pack of cards, obviously purchased as an excuse to prolong our discussions as per our agreement.

It would also serve as a way to get to understand our group members better, and so it was a risk to play.

But I had nothing better to do anyway, and I had always been pretty good at poker.

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We had played games of cards for the rest of the meeting. Of course, everyone was brave enough to bet private points, if only to make it more interesting, and I had cleaned up at the end. It was no fun playing poker without any actual wagers, as that took out any risk from calling. I had managed to make a bit under 100,000 points, a decent amount for one hour's work.

When I finally returned to my cabin, I found it to be in a rather tense mood.

Yukimura was pacing, or at least as much as one could do in a small cruise cabin. It seemed his group was bothering him and was struggling to deal with it for some reason or another.

Hirata was actually alert, and while he seemed to be in deep thought, it was the most alive I'd seen him since the incident on the island.

Kouenji was doing push-ups shirtless because what else would he be doing. Sweat was dripping off his body, so I assumed he'd been here a while, which probably accounted somewhat to Yukimura's state.

"Oh Ayanokouji. Finally, someone with a brain."

"Such an imperfect being, implying that one such as I lack a brain, my what a cruel insult."

"Shut up Kouenji. This is serious. If we don't do something, every other class will clean up. Do you or Horikita have a plan, at all?"

He got right to the heart of the problem. Every other class had most likely been coordinating with their leader, working together and targeting to find the VIP or whatever strategy they had employed. Class D leadership on the other hand had sat back and allowed our classmates to do whatever they wanted. At least they

hadn't given up their identities, which was as much as I could hope for realistically.

"Eh, we've got something. How's your group going. Anything strange, any idea who the VIP might be?"

Yukimura took a moment to consider the situation.

"No, I've got no idea who the VIP is. It would be helpful if Karuizawa and Sotomura helped out, but they're being useless. Actually, Karuizawa's been acting even worse than usual. It's like she doesn't care at all."

That peaked my interest. Karuizawa was someone who was likely to control and lead a group of people. For her to act disinterested was an anomaly.

"What's going on with Karuizawa specifically?"

I noticed Hirata looked up at my words, caution showing on his face. So, he already knew about this. It seemed they weren't as separated as everyone had thought.

"Eh, she's still being annoying, but it appears she's picking a fight with another student in our group. Class C Manabe. They can't get along at all, and it even seems like Karuizawa is avoiding her. Something doesn't feel right."

So even Yukimura, who was normally more attuned to thinking than actions noticed this change.

"If only we knew who the third VIP was. The email made it clear that there's probably a common thread behind their selection, it wasn't random. All that means is that there's someone in our class lying to us. I don't like to think about it, but every class should have the same amount, and we only know about you and Minami," Yukimura correctly deduced. It seemed the missing person hadn't been lost on his advanced deductive abilities.

While we were talking to ourselves, Kouenji started humming. It seemed us ignoring him had caused him to lose patience.

Yukimura, who'd been patient up until that point, bolted out of his chair in frustration.

"Kouenji, stop the happy-go-lucky act already! I'm not going to tell you to take things seriously, but you need to at least participate. We don't want you to screw everything up like you did back on the island," he shouted.

"Well, I couldn't exactly help it. I was in awful shape. I couldn't force myself to do the impossible," answered Kouenji.

"You just faked being ill to get out of it!"

"My, this test will be nothing but troublesome, wouldn't you say?" Kouenji sniffed.

This was my secret weapon, and it seemed the weapon had gotten bored of quietly existing. Well, it was as good a time as any.

"I assume you've already figured out the VIP of Monkey group, Kouenji?"

He looked at me, smiling with all the assurances in the world. There wasn't a hint of doubt in his face, as if he truly believed it was impossible for him to be wrong.

"Of course, demon-boy. It was simple for someone as great as me. What a troublesome exam."

He continued his push-ups, then stood gracefully. He grabbed the towel from his bed and started wiping his neck.

"Troublesome? You're not even thinking about this test at all!" countered Yukimura.

"Well, there isn't any point to continuing a test that isn't interesting, is there? Finding a liar is simple."

Kouenji, phone in hand, started to fiddle around. Soon after, all four of us, including Kouenji, received a notification from the school on our phones.

"What did you just do, Kouenji?!" shouted Yukimura.

I read over the email we'd just received from the school.

The test has now ended for the Monkey group. Those in the Monkey group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.

"Monkey Group? Hey, that's your group, Kouenji!" shouted Yukimura.

"Of course. And now, I finally have my freedom once again."

"Kouenji. What was the name you submitted?"

I could see he was on the verge of disappearing from the room, and I would lose my chance to extract this valuable information from him. He turned to face me, a predatory grin on his face.

"Oh? It would be remiss of me to not assist a member of my class, particularly one struggling so much to carry the weight of so many failures, but that would be rather dull. How about a game?"

"No games Kouenji! Who was it!" Yukimura had no idea how to manage the enigma named Kouenji. Demanding answers would never get through to him.

"I know three VIP's currently. Accounting for common patterns between them still leaves well over a thousand possible combinations."

These sorts of calculations were difficult, but I had tabulated all twelve groups in my mind, with similar traits highlighted from the three VIP's I currently knew. Despite this, I couldn't narrow the list down any further. One more VIP, however, especially if they were from a different class, would make this exponentially simpler.

"How about a hint? It should be easy enough to figure out from

here. The lady in question is from Class B."

He gave me two pieces of information. In monkey group there were two girls from Class B, Minamikata and Himeno. It was unfortunate that it was from a Class I already knew, as having one from Class A or C would have made it far easier to confirm any sort of pattern, but this was helpful information in any case.

Based on the two students I had to consider, both of them fit some of the characteristics that were common with the three VIP's I had already confirmed. Minamikata matched far more than Himeno, but it wasn't enough to decide one over the other. Although...

There was one more piece of information I had gained tonight, and it hadn't come from Kouenji, but the other two people in the room. Including into my analysis what I had considered a possibility, it made the conclusion much more obvious.

"It's Minamikata."

Kouenji clapped, obviously satisfied with my deduction.

"Bravo, demon-boy, truly marvellous. You almost matched me in the time it took to deduce the answer. But now, the pool awaits my perfect self. Adieu." Kouenji once again performed his incredible disappearing act and vanished from the doorway. We would only later realise he never returned tonight.

He had been in a room with the two girls in question, and had been able to view their reactions himself, so it wasn't a fair comparison. I wasn't going to argue with his assistance, though, so I had no problem allowing him to claim his superiority. I was just glad he had decided to help.

Knowing a fourth VIP made the situation much more advantageous. I hadn't been sure that it was Minamikata, but the chance of her being the VIP was much more likely than it being Himeno. It was a bluff, but Kouenji had answered honestly, confirming my guess.

I was under no delusions that Kouenji was wrong. He desperately wanted those 500,000 points, and wasn't going to risk it without being absolutely certain. His powers of observation were top notch, and I had no doubt that he was capable of correctly picking a liar after two hours of conversation.

"What... did you just do? How did you figure that out?"

Yukimura seemed to be in awe of what had just happened. Kouenji and I possessed minds that had been trained in recall, memory and calculation far beyond an ordinary person like Yukimura. The calculations and visualisations necessary to consider all possible combinations were simply beyond any normal student.

"Start with memorising all the different groups. Once you can do

that, you might be able to figure it out too." He wouldn't but it was a task to get him out of my hair.

He didn't seem to believe me though, huffing at my attempt to dismiss him.

"Don't be ridiculous. That was on another level."

I sighed. This was getting nowhere. A blunt method was required.

"Yukimura, leave the room. I need to have a chat with Hirata."

Hirata looked up at me again, his eyes narrowing as he seemed to know what was going on.

"Fine. Be like that if you don't want to explain. I'm going to get a drink."

He left the room. I could tell that Yukimura wanted to stay and listen to our conversation, but it was clear he wasn't wanted, and he at least possessed the skills to understand that and not interfere, making the situation worse.

Hirata was hunched up on his bed, leaning against the wall of the cabin. Beside his head I could see the waves of the ocean rock up against the porthole, a stark contrast to the starry sky outside.

I sat in front of him, saying nothing, waiting until he spoke. There was no one else here, only silence, and we stared into each other's eyes, daring the other to go first.

Eventually Hirata broke.

"What do you want, Ayanokouji."

I eyed him carefully, deciding how to proceed with this conversation.

"Why did you lie to everyone?"

"What are you talking about?"

He continued to deny the situation. I could see the fear in his eyes, not for him but for the person he was covering for.

"Why didn't you tell anyone that Karuizawa was the VIP?"

I still wasn't 100% certain, but it would explain a lot. She was the only person in Rabbit group who came close to matching the characteristics of the other four VIPs, and her strange actions would explain it, although I sensed there was more going on. Something to do with Manabe that Yukimura had talked about.

"She asked me not to."

His words came out as a whisper, almost silent, as if ashamed of admitting it and spilling his ex-girlfriend's secret.

"What's going on with her?"

He should know what I was talking about. It was the same topic that Yukimura had been discussing.

"It's not my place to say. It's also none of your business."

"On the contrary, if we are to win this exam our classmates can't be having problems, especially if she's the VIP." This didn't seem to

sway him, so I continued. "Either you tell me, or I go to Yukimura and start asking questions there. Then you have one more person investigating, and I guarantee that he can't keep secrets as well as I can."

"Even so, I still don't trust you, Ayanokouji."

I leaned back from where I was sitting, giving the man in front of me some space.

"I need you to work with me, Hirata. I can help her, if you let me."

His fists tightened; frustration etched across his face. I wasn't Karuizawa, and he had obviously made some promise to her, one he was loath to break. But they weren't a couple any longer, and he couldn't stand as close to her. His options were limited, and here I was presenting one to him. It was inevitable he would break, and open up to me.

After a long silence he finally spoke, resignedly.

"She pushed a Class C girl out of line the other day. She told me about it earlier, Manabe and two of the Class C girls in Rabbit group want to get back at her."

"And where's the issue? Karuizawa is a strong girl, surely she can solve her own problems."

I knew from her reaction to the incident on the island that this wasn't true, but I left it to Hirata to how much he wanted to expose.

"That's private. All that matters is she needs help with the situation."

I relaxed, satisfied with the information he had given me. Our conversation wasn't over, not by any means, but now it was my turn.

"Very well. I'll help her, then."

Hirata, who had been looking at his feet in shame, suddenly shot up, fury in his eyes. I hadn't seen him act like this ever, not even during the incident on the island.

"No. You'll stay away from her."

He didn't trust me, and with good reason.

"Hirata, I once told you that I'll do whatever it takes to win. I did so with Sudou, and now I'll do so to help Karuizawa. Leave it to me."

"No! I don't care what you do. Stay away from that girl!"

It was a point he didn't want to budge on, but I didn't need his permission.

"That's not for you to decide. Don't worry, nothing bad will happen. I'll solve her problem, so there's no need for concern."

I turned to leave the room, but I didn't expect him to just let me go after that. In fact, I was counting on it. So, I wasn't surprised

when he grabbed me and pushed me into a wall, arm shoved into my throat.

"I don't trust you, Ayanokouji. People around you get hurt, and I know you don't care. Sakura. Horikita. You're a bad person and I won't let you near her. I won't let that happen to Karuizawa. Not again."

I saw him flinch after the last words, obviously regretting saying them. They gave an enormous hint to the situation, and basically confirmed my theory.

"I have a secret to tell you, Hirata. I know who took Karuizawa's underwear on the island."

His eyes shot wide, shock and anger coursing through his body. He pressed even harder into my neck, although his technique was all wrong, so I felt nothing. Obviously, he had developed it fighting people who had no idea what they were doing.

"Who!"

"It was me."

I told him a lie that would illicit a reaction.

"Why! Why would you?! How could you?!"

"Because Horikita told me to."

I freed myself from his flimsy grip, and tossed him back onto his bed, but he made no move to get back up.

"Why would she ask you to do that?" Hirata couldn't believe my words.

"Isn't it obvious? She wanted to get you out of the way. Now there's no one to stop her taking over the class."

"Liar."

I faced him, prepared to react if he made a move. Hirata was tense, ready to jump at me if I said something he didn't like.

"With you gone, she's free to get Karuizawa under her control. She's already got Sudou, and once she has Karuizawa she'll move against me, and then there'll be no one to stand in her way. I want to prevent that from happening."

"no. no no no no no"

He kept denying it under his breath, collapsing onto his bed, all his previous anger drained from him in his denial of the truth, or at least what I claimed to be true. If he looked into it, he should already see Sudou cooperating with Horikita. It was a fantastical story I had woven, but there was enough evidence to convince him it was true.

"Don't worry, Hirata. I'll make sure to protect Karuizawa from her. She'll be in good hands."

I turned and left the room, leaving a broken man behind. His own classmates had betrayed him, multiple times, and the one girl he

seemed to want to protect was at the centre of it all. All the while he was powerless to stop the situation.

All that mattered now was that I solved the issue with Manabe before anyone else did.

I made my way to the deck, needing some fresh air after that tense encounter. It was almost midnight by now, and there shouldn't have been anyone up here, yet when I arrived, I saw a familiar figure standing alone by the railing.

It was strange. I had been missing her presence more and more, even though I had caught up with her so often. It seemed I had come to rely on her more than I realised. It was time to figure out just who was Kushida Kikyou before this situation got any further out of hand.

Authors Notes:

So, get fucked Hirata. Life ain't good for you either.

This chapter was a lot of fun, actually inspired by a comment I saw a while back after the end of Arc 3, so kudos to you, whoever you were. I've rewritten the overall story slightly to allow for this because it's really kinda epic.

Not much else to say. Group discussions are really hard to write, but theres not much to do about that so I just have to work through it.

Next chapter is the big one I've been wanting to do for myself, a deeper look at Kushida. Halfway through writing it now, and it's turning out pretty well, so look forward to that.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 6 - Kasumi

I walked across the deck, making my way over to Kikyou. She was leaning on the railing, staring out into the darkness beyond, probably pondering thoughts more twisted and warped than anyone I had ever come across.

I reached her, but she didn't show any sign of noticing me, too lost in her own mind. I leaned next to her, resting on the railing, attempting the impossible task of seeing what it was that she could, to see the world in the way she did. A fruitless endeavour. One could never truly understand how someone else saw the world.

After a while, she suddenly noticed my presence next to her. A slight turn of the head, recognising the sleeve of a school uniform, eyes darting up to see my face, widening as they recognised who it belonged to.

"Oh, Kiyotaka-kun! I'm sorry, I didn't notice you there. I guess I got a little distracted, hehe..."

"Don't worry, there's no one around," I reassured her. She allowed herself to slump a little, shoulders dropping as the tension left her body.

"Oh, thank god."

She sighed, before moving to one of the chairs nearby and collapsing down on it, strings cut from the marionette that was Kikyou.

"Big day?"

"Big week. Really, I never thought a holiday would be so tiring."

There hadn't been a single moment on this holiday, for the last week and a half, where Kikyou had been able to guarantee a moment alone. There was always the risk of someone catching her, and she had nowhere private to retreat to. For someone living a lie, one that caused them to suffer, it was a cruel existence.

I stayed leaning against the railing, this time facing towards the seat she was lying on. It was hard to notice, mostly due to her skill with minimal make-up, but I could see on her face how much she was struggling. The bags under her eyes, almost perfectly hidden, proved just how little sleep she had been getting. The constant tension that led to small cramps and sores in her body, which she forced herself to get through with almost no outward evidence of her suffering.

Then there was the faint smell of vomit I could detect off the edge of the ship. I was fairly confident she didn't suffer from seasickness.

Kushida Kikyou.

She was a fascinating person; with the most twisted mind I had ever come across. Her ability to lie and deceive was near perfection, her understanding of how to manipulate a situation to her advantage was incredible. She routinely forced herself to do things she hated, pushing herself beyond healthy limits to get what she wanted.

She had told me why, or at least one version of why she was like this. It made sense, to an extent. She wanted to be the best. It was something I could understand well enough, but I felt there was something missing.

In a rare moment of honesty, she had told me her story. How she needed to be the best, and she knew she would never be better than everyone at everything, but she could be the best at being nice. In her own words, she would 'be nicer and kinder than everyone else'.

I knew she hadn't lied when she told me this. Everything she had said was the truth. It was the omissions I was curious about, and I couldn't allow such a gap in my understanding of her. Kikyou was the most important person to me in this school, and I was gambling all of my actions on being able to control her. If I was to do so, then I would need to know her, inside and out.

The only question now was how to find this out.

"Did you have a chance to catch up with your roommates?"

"Yeah, I went back for a bit, spent a couple of hours with them. I just needed to get out for a while. It's sickening, being around them."

I had seen her around every now and then when we weren't meeting up ourselves. Always, she was surrounded by at least two or three people, laughing and smiling perfectly, being the best friend one could ask for.

She was quiet tonight, more so than usual. It was a trend I had been noticing, at least since the island exam whenever we met up. More and more she was seeming drained, tired, empty. The constant pressure she was putting on herself had begun to catch up, and Kikyou was edging closer and closer to a breaking point. It was unlikely she would reach it on this trip, considering we only had four more days, and I believed she could easily last until then, but it didn't mean that she wasn't suffering.

That suffering only made my job much easier.

"Are you ok?"

People brush off that question every single day. Most people can go through their lives perfectly capable of ignoring it or responding

casually with a 'yeah I'm fine'. Because they are. It doesn't affect them, and so someone reaching out a hand isn't much of an interest. It can even seem like an annoyance because they simply can't understand how much it means.

To someone who answers no, it's the most powerful question in the world.

For someone struggling, someone suffering in their own way, no matter how they are, to have another human reach out to them can be terrifying. It can be one of the scariest things, to imagine that there is someone who cares, someone who wants to help, because you know it isn't true. And yet, the offer is there. It's the most powerful thing you can do for someone struggling, to just ask if they are ok. And be prepared, in the event that they do believe you are genuine and honest in your question, for the person to finally allow themselves to break, because they know there's someone there to help them get back together.

A single tear formed in Kikyou's eye as I asked the question. Her answer was no, but she refused to admit it just yet. It would only take one more push to get her to open up to me.

She blinked the tear away quickly, but even from where I was standing, I could see the light glisten off her damp eyes, the beautiful crimson shining out at me. There was a multitude of emotions mixed behind them, but the most potent that I could see was fear. She pulled herself up, but instead of standing, she had changed from her position lying down, to curling her knees up to her chest, hugging them in.

Kikyou was afraid.

I made no move to move, neither to comfort her nor to leave. I stood where I was, waiting for her to speak. This was her moment, and I would leave the situation up to her. As long as she didn't run, I was content to see how it played out.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" The almost whisper fluttered out of her mouth.

I took a moment, considering the situation, before giving my response.

"Yes," I honestly answered. In this situation, it was best not to lie.

"I think I am too." Her eyes downcast, she admitted what she truly thought, what she truly believed she was. Admitting you weren't a good person was an extremely difficult thing to do. It meant admitting that your actions were wrong, and that was something most people simply weren't capable of doing.

"All I do is lie and pretend. I do everything that I hate, I force myself every single day, around people I hate, disgusting ugly annoying bastards. It makes me sick, and I do it to make myself

better than them. I lie, I steal, I pretend behind their backs. I've never once been honest with someone, and do you know what I hate the most?" She looked up at me, her face a crumbling mask. "I don't regret it. Not once. The incident at my old school was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I could do it again, I know everything. I've betrayed everyone who ever trusted me, and I'll do it again in a heartbeat, because in that moment, when everyone else came crashing down, I've never been happier, never felt better. So, what does that make me?"

"Why do you do it?"

"I told you, didn't I? I want to be loved. I want to be the best at being nice."

She repeated the same story she told me before, in exactly the same manner. It was a lie she had created, and it seemed she had convinced herself it was true, at least to some degree.

In response, I simply stared back at her, daring her to tell me it was true. I offered no support but my presence. I made it perfectly clear I wasn't going anywhere, and I could see that she knew. Eventually, she would tell me.

She sighed again, looking back down at her knees.

"I need to be the best. I have to. That's the only thing that drives me, that makes my life worth anything. If I'm not the best, then who am I?"

It was a start, but not the whole truth. I continued to remain silent, waiting for her to speak.

"I was the best at everything at school—until I started junior high. Then people began to overtake me in multiple aspects. I just couldn't beat certain opponents, and that ate at me, so I searched for an escape. I wanted something that I could never lose at. I wanted people to respect and envy me."

Her eyes turned distant, no longer looking at me, or herself, her mind wandering off to a different time.

"I couldn't achieve that in academics or sports. So, I decided I'd get people to trust me instead. They'd love me more than anyone else. I would extend my hand in friendship to disgusting, asocial boys, and to girls unattractive and bitter enough to turn anyone's stomach. I suppressed my real emotions and wore a smile, exuding false kindness."

A tear ran down her cheek.

"Trustworthy people receive access to secrets. When people find someone they can truly trust, they lay themselves bare. I racked up that currency. I learned everything from the secret desires of the most popular boy in class to the smartest kid's secret troubles. I

obtained information both insignificant and gravely serious."

She pulled her legs in even tighter, fingers going white from the pressure.

"Every time someone confided in me, my heart danced with joy."

She pushed her head down into her knees, no longer looking up at the world.

"Every time someone trusted me with information that meant the world to them, I shook with delight. I was trusted—the most trustworthy person around. That became my reason for being. But my power came from living a life of lies. I spent my days being slowly crushed by the weight of that stress."

She looked up at me, smiling bitterly, or as bitterly as she could with her crumbling face on the verge of breaking down.

"And this is where I end up. With everything I wanted. The people of this school, they fell for it too. I know everything. All their secrets, all their fears, people come to me. They trust me, they love me. It's everything I ever dreamed of, and it makes me happier than anything else in the world. It makes it worth the pain, the struggle, the constant pressure." She eyed the balcony of the ship for a moment. "It makes it worth the vomiting, worth me pulling out my hair from stress. To know that there isn't anyone they trust more than me, that I'm finally the best at something, makes it all worthwhile."

She was crying now, tears slowly making their way down her face as she opened her heart to me. Her darkest secrets, the things she treasured the most, she was offering to me, the only person who had really tried to know the real Kikyou. And yet I made no effort to move. I made it clear I expected more, and from the look in her eyes, I knew she knew this wasn't quite over.

"Why?"

She said she needed to be the best. It was the truth, but a flimsy reason. There had to have been something significant in her life, something that affected her right to her core, because I couldn't believe that someone would go to these lengths simply because they were addicted to being the best.

In this current moment, her claim was the truth. Her life had been warped by this addiction, this obsession, into a self-perpetuating cycle that she could never get out of. No matter what, she had to be the best. But nothing starts out that way. Something triggered this in her.

"Kasumi. My sister." She spat out the last word, the bitterness invading her mouth. "We went to different schools, and so in junior school I was the best. The smartest, the fastest, the cutest. But at home she was better than me in every way."

Her posture had changed. Before she had been hunched up, hiding from the feelings inside of her, afraid of how I would react. Now she was tense, bundled up, with a hint of true rage growing in her eyes, to a degree I had never seen before. Not even Horikita elicited this much anger.

"No matter what I did, she was always better. Sure, I got praised too. I was almost perfect, always doing the best I could. But no matter what, my parents chose her. To them, she was always smarter, always faster, always prettier. Every single fucking thing she was better than me! My entire life I was the second child, the lesser child! Not once did they say I was better than her, that they were prouder of me. That fucking whore took everything!"

She stopped speaking, breathing heavily from her outburst. This was the root of her problems. A lack of parental love.

From what she was saying, she might have twisted the situation in her mind. It was possible they showed preferential treatment to neither, treating both of them the same. Kikyou, with her desire to be the best took it as a constant never-ending slight. Although it was also very possible that what she was saying was true. That she really had always been second best to the people who were supposed to love her the most.

Either way, this was the truth I had been wanting to hear. This was her reason, buried deep down, why she needed to be the best. If her parents wouldn't recognise it, then she would make the whole world do so instead. An entire school, everyone she knew, praising her as being the nicest, most trustworthy person there was.

To her, it wasn't enough to make up for the lack of parental recognition.

"This is what made you who you are. Why you try so hard. Because you need to be the best. To beat Kasumi."

She looked at me, dark and empty eyes, of someone who had hated so long that she no longer understood why she did.

"I hate her. I hate them. It's their fault I'm like this. And even so, I still love it. They made me into a bad person. It's their fault."

Finally, she relaxed. The anger left her body, and in return she was left to the broken feelings of before. The fear, terror, and self-hatred were all that was left. Once again, she curled up, pulling her legs right back into her chest. The tears had never stopped. They had slowed somewhat during her rant, but now they began anew, flooding down her cheeks as the realisation properly set in. She had told me everything. I now knew who she was, to a deeper level than possibly anyone else in the world.

It was a monumental feeling, and not necessarily in a good way, to know that there was a person who understood you completely.

Who knew what made you, you?

Still, I made no move to comfort her.

"I need to be the best. I need people to trust me. They do. I'm the most trustworthy. And yet it's not enough. It's never enough. I push myself, day after day. I do whatever it takes, and yet it can never be enough. Because Kasumi would have done it better."

"Kikyou."

She didn't move, didn't look up, stuck in her own world of self-torment, muttering, sobbing to herself over and over, lost to the world around her. I had pushed too far. In her moment of weakness, I had taken advantage of her and forced her to tell me her story. I had watched her break down, and made no move to stop it, but now it had gone on long enough. Any longer and she wouldn't trust me at all.

"I think you are a bad person."

She pulled herself even further in.

"But that doesn't matter to me."

Her sobs stopped, before she cautiously looked up at me, the man leaning on the railing across from her, who had done nothing as she broke down in front of her, after having offered a hand in support.

"I'm a bad person too. And I don't care about your past, or why you are the way you are. That doesn't matter to me, not anymore. I've had... an interesting life. Before I came to this school, before I met you, I've never had a friend. I was never close to my parents. And so, I never really learnt what it meant to be close to someone. Trust, friendship. These were things I never learned about.

"But Kikyou, I trust you."

It was risky, telling her hints about my past. I couldn't let anyone know too much, given how secretive the information was, but it was necessary in this situation. After everything I had done to her, it was necessary. There was one thing she truly wanted, and I was one of the only people in the school still holding it back from her.

She jumped to her feet so suddenly I didn't expect it. I tensed, ready to chase after her if she ran away, but her next action was something I hadn't expected at all.

A bundle of warmth threw themselves at me, hugging me tight as she could. Kikyou had run across the deck and leapt at me. Her arms wrapped around my back, pulling me close, and she buried her face into my chest.

In response, I wrapped my arms around her in return, pulling her into me, deepening the hug. This was what she needed right now. Someone close, someone to comfort her. I had been pulling at the strands of her sanity, unravelling her very being before me, breaking her down to her very core. Now, at her most vulnerable,

she was seeking comfort from me, and I wasn't going to deny it.

I could feel my shirt getting damp as her tears soaked into it, but that wasn't something I was concerned about. I had always known she was shorter than me, but it was clearer than ever now, her head barely coming up to my shoulders. I gently raised one arm, and began to pat her head, allowing her to lean on me as I leaned on the railing. She wasn't crying anymore but had no intention of letting me go, it seemed.

I didn't want to either, and so we stayed as we were, embracing in the open night air, slowly stroking her hair. The mood had changed dramatically, from the previous tense and painful one, to one of calm relaxation and trust.

Eventually she moved, not breaking the embrace but looking up at me, a beautiful beaming smile on her face, tears still framing it, but no longer tears of fear, rage, and regret. These were tears of joy.

"Thank you." It was honest, one of the few things she had ever said that contained no hint of guile, no subterfuge. She genuinely meant it.

"For what?"

"For being the first person to ever accept the real me."

Her cheeks were tinged with red after saying that, and she buried her face back into my chest, avoiding any eye contact out of embarrassment.

It had always been hard to tell what was real with this girl, but in this moment, I knew she was sincere. Kikyou lived a life of lies and deceit, collecting the secrets and trust of everyone around her, but now, in this moment, I knew she was being honest with me. She trusted me, genuinely, completely.

And now, finally, she was mine.

"Everyone has a mask. Everyone lies about something. I don't care about that, I don't care that you lie, that you pretend to be a different person, just so you can be the best. If that's what you have to do, then I'll be there for you every step of the way."

"Really?You... you mean it?"

She spoke into my shirt, still not willing to look at me, nor willing to believe my words. It was too good to be true for her. After everything that had happened at her previous school, where an entire grade turned on her, it was unbelievable that someone who knew everything about her would choose to stay with her. And yet here I was, holding her.

"I made you a promise. Do you remember what it was?"

Finally, she looked up at me.

"You said you'd help me."

"I intend to keep that promise. We're partners."

She smiled once again, finally believing what I told her. We remained like that for a moment, her leaning against me, me with one arm around her, one on her head. I was acutely aware of a pressure on my chest, the result of her perfect figure, but I wasn't going to mention it. She was comfortable in this situation, and surprisingly enough, so was I. I simply held her, relishing in the moment of another person trusting me. The warmth of another human, huh?

This wasn't only for Kikyou. What I had told her applied to myself as well. More than anyone outside the White Room, she knew who I was. She knew just how dangerous, how ruthless, and how little I cared about other people. By all rights she should be terrified, should hate me, like Hirata did, and yet here she was, seeking comfort from me.

What a pair we were. Two broken people, defined as 'bad' by the world. And yet here I was, helping her heal. And, in a small amount, so she was helping me.

Suddenly, though, her face shifted into a smirk, one that gave me a bad feeling.

"If we're partners, then what the hell are you planning to do with Shiina?"

"Huh?"

This was an abrupt turn in conversation. The mood immediately shifted, and she pushed herself away from me. The smirk never left her face, and I could tell she wasn't completely serious, but still I had an irrational fear for my life.

Hands on hips, eyes narrowed, and a smile that made me regret my most recent choices.

"You asked her out to breakfast to talk about books. So? What's the deal, you like her?" A half-joking, half-accusatory tone filled the question.

At the end of the last meeting, I had asked Shiina to breakfast tomorrow, in order to continue discussing a book. We had disagreed over some of the fundamental moral allowances in Enders Game, and so I had invited her to breakfast to finish our discussion. It seemed Kikyou had overheard it.

"It's just breakfast, there's nothing else to it." I paused, considering what she was saying. "You aren't jealous, are you?"

She flushed for a moment, taken aback by my words, not expecting a counterattack, having assumed I was on the defensive.

"Ha! What kind of girl do you take me for? You two book buddies are cute together."

She turned away and faced towards the ocean off the boat, muttering something quietly that I couldn't make out, although it

probably wasn't important.

I sighed. There was no beating a woman in an argument, especially when it came to attraction. It was something I had learned from being around Kikyou. You could never win an argument with a woman, and even if you did win, you still lost. It was best to let things like this go.

"Hm? Ah, Kushida-chan, there you are!"

We both turned to look at the nearby doorway that led out onto the deck, only to see Maezono standing there. This was what had brought Kikyou to her earlier state. Even here, so late at night, it was possible for her to be discovered. Her mask was endless, never having a break from the painful lie she put herself through.

"Maezono-san! Sorry, I got distracted talking with Kiyotaka-kun."

And just like that, there was no trace of any of the previous emotions in her, the mask was back in place, and the angel had replaced the devil. I was surprised to see another person awake, and on the deck. It had been a big day for everyone, dealing with the exam, and it was almost 1am.

"Well, you left a while ago and I started to get worried, so I came to find you." Her face changed after saying that, into a suggestive smirk. This wasn't going to go well. "Although I can see you were in good hands with Ayanokouji-kun here. Anything you'd like to share with me?"

And the pattern played out once again. Someone made an insinuation about our relationship, Kikyou brushed it off, and the accuser was somewhat mollified.

"Hehe nope, my lips are sealed!"

Wait. No. That's not right. Deny it, Kikyou.

"Ooh, I see how it is. I guess we'll be off then. Goodbye Ayanokouji-kun. Take care of Kushida-san."

"Bye bye Kiyotaka-kun. I'll see you tomorrow!"

They both vanished back through the door Maezono had come through before I had a chance to reply.

"Goodbye?"

That was problematic. So far there hadn't been too many rumours about us being in a relationship since it was Kikyou who controlled the rumour mill and could shut them down. If she was no longer interested in doing so... well, I would have to be prepared to fight off at least three different boys.

I moved to the seat that Kikyou had been curled up on earlier, deciding I might as well sleep there for the night. I probably wasn't welcome back in my cabin, at least for tonight, until Hirata had time to cool off.

It was good weather. There was a nice breeze, and not a cloud in

sight. It was warm enough that I wouldn't be too cold, and the chair was rather comfortable. They were designed for sleeping on in the day after all.

Aside from Maezono's interruption, that conversation had gone splendidly. Kikyou had finally opened up to me and given me the whole truth. I now understood, on a fundamental level, who she was, how she thought, and why she did what she did, and she had finally, completely, decided to trust me.

Of course, most of what I had said in that conversation was the truth. There was no point patronising her, or placating her with lies, when it would only come back to haunt me later. Brutal honesty in such a situation was the most effective method, and I truly had meant most of what I said to her.

I didn't care that she wore a mask, that everything she did was a lie. She was a bad person and so was I, and that didn't bother me one bit. I was going to stay by her side and help her achieve her goals, as long as she helped me achieve mine.

But I didn't trust her. Not yet. That had been a lie. It was the most powerful card I had to play, after knowing her true self, giving her my trust was one of the most important things I could have done in that moment. It was something no one else had ever done for her. Despite knowing her ulterior motives, I still believed in her.

It was all a lie.

It had been a fine line to walk. I didn't want a parasite, someone attached to me completely, who couldn't function without me. I needed someone who could work independently, who I could work with to achieve my goals, but didn't rely on me in return. I needed someone who wanted to be by my side, but could stand alone, and so I offered her the thing she wanted in exchange for her trust. I needed a partner, not a tool. And that's what she had become.

It was a dangerous move. A partner, as opposed to a tool, is much riskier to use. They can turn on you, betray you, act independently. I had much less control over her, and while the benefits of Kikyou functioning properly were worth it, there was still a large risk.

No, while she chose to be by my side, not out of need but want, I couldn't properly trust her. But soon, I would have the final missing piece. And once I had that, then maybe, I could make my words true. Perhaps then, I could actually trust her.

Part of me even hoped that day could come.

Authors Notes:

So, it's not R U OK Day, but I'm still going to ask.

Are you OK?

I've been unfortunate enough to have two separate tragedies

occur in my life, and there have been a lot of times where I've wondered whether things would have gone differently if I'd just asked that question.

If there's something bothering you, something wrong, find someone to talk to. It doesn't matter how big or small of an issue, and it can be terrifying to admit it to someone else, but still go for it. If not for yourself, then for the rest of the people in your life.

And if you need to talk, and can bring yourself to trust a random stranger on the internet, my dm's are always open on here, and I'm happy to listen.

https://www.ruok.org.au/join-r-u-ok-day - big fan of this organisation, just because of the message they share. Was always great when they'd show up to my school. Take a moment, and ask someone if they're ok. The question can mean a lot.

Sorry, just a serious topic i wish was addressed more often, as it's something that hits close to home, and was relevant in this chapter. Now onto other details.

This Kushida is no longer close to canon. I don't believe for a second that canon-Kushida would ever think her actions were wrong, but necessary. Some of this was stolen directly from 'Kushida Kikyou Soliquily', the opening of Volume 6, and something i feel people forget about often, but most of it is a divergence.

This Kushida has done a lot worse than in canon. She was complicit in Horikita being brutally assulted, covered up and framed Komiya for the assult of Sakura, and she did threaten rape allegations for the person she's now closest to. Looking back on that would be pretty daunting, and can easily shatter her perception of 'I'm the best'.

I really enjoyed this chapter. It was something I've wanted to do for myself for ages, not even as part of a story. To understand her better. I talked it over with a few people, and the lack of parental affection was the best conclusion we could come to. For people who don't understand, and had good parents, or even lacklustre ones, it's not possible to imagine just how much rejection from parents can affect you. I thought this motivator fit perfectly with her character.

Massive authors note, and there's still more i wanted to address, but it can wait for the next chapter. I have no idea how many people actually read these, but if you do, then you have my thanks.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 7 - Checkmate

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun. You made it."

"Shiina. I'm glad you could meet me."

The silver-haired angel gave me a smile and gestured to the chair opposite her in the breakfast restaurant.

"Please, take a seat. I was happy you invited me out to breakfast."

I sat down facing her, and discretely took a look around the room. Out of every restaurant I had been to on this ship, this was by far the emptiest, which was surprising considering it was breakfast. There was only one other person around: Ishizaki, one of Ryuuen's cronies. I suspected he had been sent to keep an eye on us, since he had been blatantly staring directly at me from his menu since I walked in. Not the most competent spy, but I could understand Ryuuen not trusting me.

I had no idea whether Shiina had any idea why he was here. She was a kind soul, and saw the best in everyone, so it was likely she didn't assume he had any suspicious intentions, but I wouldn't put it past her. Kind but sharp was a way to describe her, although a better word would be refined.

"So, was there any particular reason you chose this place?" A little probing couldn't hurt.

"Hmm, it's quiet, I suppose. Makes it easier to read and eat. Also, I'm not particularly fond of foreign food. I'm much more comfortable with our native breakfasts, rather than some of the greasy burgers I've seen my classmates consume in the mornings."

Another reason this restaurant was rather empty. On this ship there was an unusually large number of foreign places, and this was one of the only two places that you could get traditional Japanese meals. It seemed most of the year was experimenting, and taking this chance to try exotic foods, something I could completely understand.

"That's understandable. I've been trying new foods all week, so this is a nice break."

She smiled at me again, before ordering the basic breakfast meal from the waiter. It didn't consist of much, just some Miso soup, a

rice bowl and some fish, but at the very least I was glad to be away from Kikyou and her waffles for a morning.

Shiina wasn't one to engage in pointless conversation. She would remain polite at all times, I had found, doing her best to not offend, but any gossip or meaningless conversation was wasted on her. True to that nature, she reached down into the bag she was always carrying, before pulling out her copy of Ender's Game.

"We were discussing the work of Orson Scott Card at the last meeting, were we not?"

"Yes, in fact that's why I called you here. You never did explain your problem with that particular story. If only we had more time at the meetings."

She laughed at my joke, a beautiful smile on her face, and I felt a stab of guilt at the deception.

"It's entirely your fault that we have so much time. Though it is nice to finally meet someone who likes books."

"There aren't enough people who enjoy them."

"That's true enough."

Our meals arrived, and I watched as Shiina wielded her chopsticks with an impressive amount of grace. We had been delivered a teapot with our meals, and I watched as she handled it with ease, masterfully filling both our cups with some Green Tea in an impeccable manner.

"If you don't mind me asking, do you practice Tea Ceremonies?"

She looked surprised for a second, before blushing and confirming my suspicion. Apparently, it was a slightly embarrassing hobby of hers, but I saw no shame in it. It was a refined skill, something I myself had learned well, and she handled our breakfast with ease.

"Do you really believe the Battle School to be a good system, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Ah, finally we were on topic for our reason to meet.

"I think it's an excellent idea. In a world where the brightest and best are needed, I don't see a problem with sending them to a special school."

In some senses, Battle School was much like the White Room, except in the opposite manner entirely. While the White Room intended to prove anyone could be a genius, the Battle School only took the best to begin with, before elevating them. The end result however, was a meritocracy of the truly best and brightest minds there were.

"Don't you feel any guilt for the students though, and their parents? Most of them aren't given a choice on whether they want to go."

"They are given a choice. While it's influenced by propaganda from their birth, it's still a choice."

She frowned at my words recognising the truth in them.

"I understand they are fictional characters, but it's difficult to not feel any sympathy for them, especially when reading about what they became afterwards."

"Genius military leaders?"

"Children brainwashed into weapons before being targeted at each other."

It was a hard point to argue against, simply because it was the truth. None of the Battle School graduates had a good life afterwards, especially none of the ones from Dragon army, or Ender's Jeesh.

"It's rather ironic for us to be placed in Dragon group, wouldn't you say?" It seemed Shiina had been thinking along the same lines that I had been. It was a strange coincidence for the groups of excellence to both be named Dragon.

"But Ryuuen's already in our group. Who's supposed to be Bonzo then?"

She laughed at my pitiful joke. It was a beautiful laugh, one I had only heard when she conversed with me. It seemed she hadn't found anyone else to open up around other than myself. The sharp pain returned.

"Ryuuen's too smart to be Bonzo." She frowned for a moment, making the same unfortunate realisation I had. "He's far more like Achilles."

"An unfortunate comparison, but apt. I suppose that would make me Bean?"

"Perhaps. But that would make me Petra, and that's a love triangle I would rather avoid."

I choked on my fish as she said that. It was fascinating. Even though we had to force the comparisons a little, they matched up rather well with our grade. I suppose that fiction does imitate real life, and our school did share quite a few similarities with Battle School.

"Really though, if anyone is Bean it's Sakayanagi. Short, heartless and brilliant."

To most people that would sound like an insult, but I was sure both Shiina and Sakayanagi if she heard it, would find it to be a glowing compliment.

"I can't argue with that, although we seem to have gotten off topic. You were advocating for child abduction?"

A cruel jab, Shiina. I would have to get her back for that.

"Ignoring the impending alien invasion, which yes, I am aware

was propaganda," I clarified to silence her look of disapproval, "what would those children be doing otherwise? Ender was counting how many circles he could draw on his desk before they overlapped, having learned everything his teachers could offer him at age 3. Bean, while a special case, conquered the world with 100 Thai men. Peter and Valentine were rejected despite being capable enough, and just the two of them were bad enough. One of them brought back McArthy-ism and the other became the leader of the world."

She frowned at the truth in my words, staring despondently at her food. It hadn't been a good choice in the books. The ethics of Battle School were questionable, but I believed them to be justified, simply because I could relate to the students. If I had gone to a genuinely ordinary school, I would have become bored out of my mind by now.

"It's still not right. Those children deserved to live their own childhoods, free of obligation and military rigour."

"They weren't ordinary children, and hence had a different definition of ordinary childhood. Most of them ended up the leader of their nation. Even if they hadn't gone to Battle School, they would have ended up as world leaders inevitably. At least in this case they got an education suited to them, to a level they deserved."

Shiina considered my words, before a smile returned to her face. She was always a good person to debate. She had her beliefs, but unlike most was willing to actually reconsider them with good arguments. She wasn't uninformed either, and the beliefs she would argue were backed up with evidence. She wasn't one to play devil's advocate and cause problems. No, Shiina was a proper book critic, and I quite enjoyed these casual discussions.

"I suppose that's true. I hadn't considered what it would be like for them away from Battle School before. I suppose it's easier for people like you and Sakayanagi-san to realise that, especially since it mirrors your lives so similarly."

I took a sip of Miso soup, before leaning back in my chair, enjoying the warm liquid draining down my throat. It was cleansing to have, especially after all the sugary meals I had been consuming.

"No, I don't believe either of us would have made it there. On intelligence alone, only Bean accomplished that, but I wouldn't meet the 'desire for war' requirement, and Sakayanagi's disability wouldn't have made it possible for her either."

Shiina sighed, her dreams of her friend going to space to command an army shattered.

"A shame. It would have been cool to see you in the Battle Room at least."

Was she fully aware these stories were fictional? It was entirely possible for a bookworm without many or any friends to get lost in their reading, and to lose the line between reality and fiction. Perhaps she had lost it a little.

"Who was your favourite character?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure. I couldn't relate to any of them completely, but if I had to pick, I would say... Valentine."

Not an unexpected answer. Most people would pick someone from Ender's Jeesh, but Shiina simply couldn't relate to the Battle School students. It was Valentine's compassion that was the most understandable.

"An interesting choice. As long as you don't say Ender."

She giggled.

"No one can claim to be like Ender, he's too unrealistic. How about you?"

"Hmm. I'd like to say Bean, but that would be a bit presumptuous. Perhaps... Nishino?"

Nishino wasn't a character from the books, as far as I knew. No, Nishino was a 50-50 guess at the VIP for Snake group. And at the imperceptibly slight tense in Shiina's fingers as I said the name, I could tell I was correct.

"Nishino? I'm afraid I don't remember that character. There weren't a lot of Japanese in it at all, the only one I can think of is Shen."

Her voice was strong the entire way through, not a hint of wavering, but her eye twitched ever so slightly. She was aware of how the conversation had turned. It had been friendly at first, but now it was an interrogation, one which she was holding up remarkably well in.

But not well enough.

"My mistake. I must have meant Yoshimoto."

My eyes darted around her body, taking in every single part of her as I said the name. Fingers, eyes, mouth, ears, shoul— there. An ever so slight sag in her shoulders, one of relief. So, it wasn't Yoshimoto. Then by elimination the VIP for Tiger group had to be Isoyama.

"Perhaps we could move onto a different topic? I've always been fascinated by the way the Formics are described."

Finally, a slight tremble in her voice. It had been a guess, but I was confident that Ryuuen would have shared with her the VIPs of Class C. She had been the reason for his almost successful plan on the island and had proven herself so far in the group meeting. He had taken her into his inner circle, it seemed, and made the mistake of trusting someone else.

I sighed. She had put up a good fight. It was unlikely that anyone else would have been able to pick up on her tells there. No, she was a most successful actor, impressive at hiding the truth.

"I truly am sorry about that, Shiina. I do enjoy talking about books with you, and I didn't want to take advantage of you like this. But now I know that Nishino, Isoyama and Oda are your VIP's"

She gave me a wavering smile, a stark contrast to the beaming ones I had been receiving moments ago, going quite well with the single tear rolling down her cheek. And in that moment, the regret, shame and pure unfiltered sadness I could see in her, confirmed completely that I was right.

"I understand. It's all part of the competition, right? You did what you had to do, and don't worry, I don't blame you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Somehow those words hit harder than any blow I had received in the White Room.

I tapped my empty plate with my chopsticks, debating on whether or not I was even worse of a person. In the end, I decided I was, and went for the greedy option.

"I understand if you don't believe me, or don't trust me any more, but I really do enjoy our friendship. I understand if you want nothing more to do with me, but if you really can forgive me, I'd like to read books with you again sometime."

It was a scummy move, playing on her emotions there, but there were a few reasons for it. One, she was my main contact in Class C, and my main way of getting information directly from their leadership. It would be a shame to give that up.

Two, I genuinely did enjoy our time together, and it would be a shame if I had to lose that to win this exam. Even though if it came down to it, I would betray her again in a heartbeat to secure my victory.

I stood up from the table, and after pushing my chair in gave her another look. Shiina hadn't looked up from her place, and I was surprised she was holding it together this much. From what I knew she hadn't made any close friends here yet and had a string of teasing and loneliness all throughout junior high due to her love of books. My actions had been about as cruel as one could be to her, befriending and taking advantage of her, and it would be understandable if she never wanted to speak to me again.

"Tell Ryuuen I'd like to meet the two of you after the next meeting. Well, if you don't want to come along, I understand, but I'd like to meet Ryuuen at least."

I delivered my final message before walking out of the restaurant, leaving Shiina to her copy of Ender's Game.

She really was like Valentine. Less able to interact with people,

but always kind and compassionate, and in the end that was taken advantage of. There was no character more like her in the story.

I didn't know who I was though.

Was the emotionless genius Bean, or the cruel manipulative Peter.

I couldn't work out which one would be worse.

At least Peter wasn't vertically challenged, in both directions.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

I decided to head to the meeting room early and was lucky enough to find that I was the first person there. I sent off a quick message, before closing my eyes to take a short nap while I waited for the 20 minutes until 1 o'clock to pass.

It passed in a blur, and it wasn't long before someone was snapping their fingers in front of my face in an attempt to wake me.

I cracked one eye open, only to see the disapproving look of Horikita.

"Good, you're awake."

Before responding, I took a moment to glance at my phone, and noticed that I had slept for longer than expected. It was currently 12:58, and as I looked around the room, I could see various members of the group had already arrived.

I looked to my left, noticing Kikyou was there, who gave me an explanation for the strange situation.

"No one wanted to wake you. Something about you not being worth talking to?"

From what I could see, everyone was here except for Class C. Horikita, it seemed had been the last to arrive, even with my message suggesting she arrive earlier.

"I suppose I should offer you my thanks for the warning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Huh? Oh, right."

I had messaged her, suggesting she arrived later than usual. Horikita, ever the model student, had arrived punctually five minutes before each meeting so far. I had suggested she come a little later this time, in order to avoid a problematic existence for her.

"Do you have any idea why Hirata would be looking for me?"

I sat up properly, stretching myself out from my nap. It hadn't been long, but long enough to make up for my slightly undesirable sleep outside last night.

"Eh, he was acting very off last night, and he kept mentioning you. I couldn't really understand what he was saying, but I figured it was best if you avoided him for a bit."

Horikita snorted, before leaning back in her seat, having successfully woken me up on time. The rules never specified that

one had to be awake for the meeting, just that you had to be present in the room.

"Well, it didn't help anyway. He was waiting for me outside, even though he would've had to sprint to get to his room on time. Honestly, I couldn't understand what he was accusing me of either. Something about clothes?"

"To be honest I'm not confident Hirata even cares about going to his group at this point."

It was a concern I had had for a while. He had managed to get to the places he needed to be in order to not bring down punishments on his class, but after last night's revelations I couldn't be sure that he would still put the effort in.

"No, he's there. I just got a message from Nishimura. She was worried he was going to be late, but he just showed up," Kikyou interjected, assuaging our concerns.

We had been speaking for a while now, surprisingly the three of us conversing without any major problems, when Ryuuen and the Class C group walked in, just before the announcement of the beginning of this meeting session.

"Cutting it fine, aren't you Ryuuen?"

Kanzaki was already on the assault, doing his best to antagonise Ryuuen into slipping up, but it didn't even seem to bother him. An uncharacteristic expression was on Ryuuen's face, one of genuine anger, and he didn't even seem to notice Kanzaki's words.

"Oi, you bastard."

He marched over to me, and the room grew silent as they finally realised that for the first time Ryuuen was serious.

I glanced over his shoulder to see what his classmates were doing. Suzuki and Shiina had taken a seat, but while Suzuki was doing everything he could to avoid looking at me, Shiina was staring directly at the situation with sad eyes. Obviously, she had spoken to Ryuuen, as I had hoped, and knew exactly what he was planning. That she didn't try to stop it showed just how serious she knew he was about this.

I didn't make a move as he approached, and when he swung his fist around, I simply sat there and let it hit my jaw, tilting my head slightly so that he didn't break it.

The force of the blow still sent me backwards, tilting and almost falling off my chair, if Horikita hadn't grabbed me at the last second and helped me right myself. It didn't seem he was going to do anything more, but he continued to stand in front of me intimidatingly, fists clenched, anger etched into his face. I had expected a confrontation with him sooner or later, but for it to be between our classes in general, and for him to have his same

attitude as on the island. My actions with Shiina, however, seemed to have crossed a line, one which he would make exceptions for.

"Ryuuen-kun! Stop, don't hit him!" Ichinose, ever the defender of the peace, had shot to her feet in indignation, along with Andou and surprisingly enough Katsuragi too, showing his support.

Most impressive however, was that Kikyou hadn't even flinched as a fist flew at the person sitting next to her.

"I suppose I deserved that."

"Damn right you did, you fucking monster." He cracked a cruel smile at me, one devoid of any compassion. "I guess you really do deserve that title now."

"Ryuuen-kun, please stop..."

Finally, Shiina intervened, having put up with more violence than she was capable of withstanding. She was more than happy to participate in the class conflicts, but her participation in the first place was to reduce the violence that had occurred originally, and wouldn't condone more, especially not in her name.

Suddenly, although it wasn't unexpected, the door to the room was thrown open, and an exam supervisor ran in, puffing, clearly exhausted from sprinting from wherever they observed us through the cameras in the room.

"Ryuuen Kakeru! What do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm sorry for the confusion. I fell off my chair. Ryuuen was just making sure I was alright."

The punch had been warranted somewhat, and I wasn't going to take an advantage over Class C through such a petty method.

"No, sir, that's not true! Ryuu—mmphf!"

Kikyou, understanding the situation had made her way around to Horikita, and covered her mouth before any more damage could be done.

Throughout the commotion, Ryuuen hadn't even turned to the teacher, continuing to stare directly at me. As I spoke, his face shifted slightly, a hint of respect showing through.

"If no one claims that anything happened, then I suppose nothing happened. Continue on with your meeting."

The supervisor, understanding how the situation was unfurling, followed the school guidelines. It was encouraged for students to sort out their own problems, and while violence wasn't condoned, independence was, and without any physical injuries to report they couldn't care less about a single punch.

"Ryuuen. I think it would be best if you take a seat."

Katsuragi gave his suggestion, which was followed by numerous nodding heads backing him up from ever class, even Shiina. Ryuuen, recognising that he had gotten his revenge, at least for

now, calmed himself down slightly and returned to his seat beside Shiina.

"Well, I guess we should get on with it then. Does anyone want to explain what happened to Monkey group?"

It was the question on everyone's mind, as only four people knew the truth of that situation, and none of us had shared it. It was an opportunity for me to step up and once again take control of the group.

"Actually, that was Kouenji. He got bored of the test and decided to end his own group. I don't know how many of you have talked to him, but he's impossible to control."

Kanzaki leaned forwards, interested in my words, whilst most of the people brushed them off, having come across Kouenji at least once. He had a special kind of presence, which meant he could get away with basically doing anything, and people would say 'That's just Kouenji'.

"Do you have any idea which name he submitted?"

"Why are you so interested in that, Kanzaki-kun? Perhaps the VIP was from Class B?"

Despite the recent incident, Shiina seemed as sharp as ever.

"Not at all, Shiina-san. I simply wanted to confirm the name. I don't know about you, but Kouenji isn't one to make stupid choices. He would at least have a good idea of who the VIP was."

Interesting. So Kanzaki had determined this as well, despite only having met Kouenji possibly a couple of times. Or maybe he simply couldn't conceptualise someone as irrational as the enigma and was predicting what he would have done instead.

"I suppose there's nothing more to do but discuss. So, I'd like to ask everyone to turn their phones off."

There was an air of caution in the room as I began to speak again. Last time I had made myself the center of attention, things hadn't gone to well, so caution was expected.

"And why would we do that?"

"Because if we can discuss this in a reasonable manner, and I can determine that I trust you all, I will prove myself to be the VIP."

That got a reaction. Class B especially, who were now frantic as one of their VIP's had been potentially discovered, complied quickly. Kikyou followed my lead, and after a moment's consideration so did Katsuragi and the rest of Class A, everyone laying their phones out in obvious spots as proof they were off.

"Are you sure about this, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Horikita was understandably nervous about the situation. Not once in this group meeting had things been in her control.

"Trust me."

"Never." Yet she still turned her phone off. It was progress, at least.

"This is some bullshit."

It was Ryuuen who decided to cause problems.

"I simply want discussion without fear of being betrayed. This is the only way we will make any progress in the group, or can you explain a reason for you not to participate?"

"Because there's no way you will actually show us any proof, Ayanokouji-kun."

I grew concerned at these words, as Class C refused to cooperate. They had figured out the flaw in my argument, although it wasn't hard to see, and I couldn't fight this much, or they would get even more suspicious on why I wanted to prove I was the VIP.

Luckily, Kanzaki had run out of patience for Ryuuen.

"Ryuuen, I get that you have some problem with Ayanokouji, but just turn your damn phone off. Even if this is all a bluff, at least it's conversation."

In the end, it was Shiina who convinced him. There were still five more meetings after this and losing at most this one with my annoyances wouldn't hurt much. At the very least, no one would listen to me again after this, whether I was the VIP or not.

"Thank you." And that's check.

I waited a moment, collecting my thoughts, figuring out how to explain my arguments, while tapping my fingers in my pocket.

One.

"So, I'm the VIP. I could show you the email, but is there any way to ensure that no one will betray me?"

"Kukuku obviously not, which is why this is fucking stupid."

Two.

"Now now, Ryuuen-kun. I'd like to think that we as leaders can all trust each other's. It wouldn't do for a class leader to betray another class this early into our competition. You'd never be able to make a deal again for the next three years."

"That's a valid point, Amikura-san. Ryuuen, as much as I understand what you are saying, I can see this would be a good trust exercise." Katsuragi leant his support to Amikura's argument, being something he would advocate himself.

Three.

"What, so you bought into this bullshit too?"

Four.

"Ryuuen-kun. I think that you are missing this opportunity. Yes, someone could betray the group, but it would only result in at most a 100-point swing. If you could prove now that you can keep to a deal, then in the future it would be easier to make an alliance."

"And who's gonna make an alliance with me. You? You got shit in your class. I don't even know why you're defending that monster after he beat the shit out of you."

Five.

Horikita didn't respond again, Ryuuen's words giving her cause to think. She was, after all, following through with my plan, trusting my word despite my warnings and actions. She shouldn't have a reason to trust me, and yet here she was, arguing in my defence. Ryuuen had targeted her insecurities perfectly enough to get her out of the argument.

"Ryuuen. Are you really saying that 50 class points are worth more to you than the millions we get from option one? You would break faith with every other class, lose 1 and a half million private points, just for 50 class points?"

Six. Seven.

"Kanaki-kun, it would be lovely if we could think that way. If we really could trust each other, then this exam would be easy. But the fact is, you have no way to prove that you wouldn't betray us. Every single one of us is capable of securing outcome three. Yes, you can claim to have the moral high ground, preach the virtue of proving trust, but in the end there's no guarantee. Outcome One is impossible. I say that with absolute certainty, because you are all just as capable of betraying Ayanokouji-kun, or whoever the VIP is, just as easily as Ryuuen-kun is."

Eight.

The room fell silent at Shiina's words, pondering what she said. It was true, there was never any guarantee to secure Outcome One, but most people had been blinded by the chance for progression in this stalemate that they were willing to have a pointless discussion. It had only been Ryuuen who saw through the fog and realised this was an elaborate show, with no real conclusion to be drawn from it.

Nine.

"I have been wondering something. This conversation was entirely possible to have with our phones left off. And yet, Ayanokouji-kun insisted that we do so, and still left his own on. Perhaps it was forgetfulness, but I find that unlikely." Amikura, the first person to voice this unnatural complexity I had created, narrowed her eyes at me and leaned forward. "Perhaps you aren't the VIP, and hoped to scare them out, leaving yourself the prime position to submit the name and claim Outcome Three."

Ten. Checkmate.

"That's true. Ayanokouji, would you mind turning your phone off before we continue this?" Ichinose requested.

I sighed.

"There's no need for that. I'm the VIP but I have no intention of proving it. Besides, this was never about finding the VIP in Dragon group. Surely that was obvious." If Sakayanagi or Kouenji had been here, I was sure they would have seen through my action immediately. This group was formed of the best of the best, but it still fell short of making the simple connection in a few minutes.

"Explain then, Ayanokouji. Unless you were just wasting our time again." Katsuragi was fed up with my nonsense, sick of me causing problems in this group, despite his neutral strategy.

"It's simple. All of you were so caught up on finding our VIP." A few faces paled as they heard my words, finally figuring out what was going on. "But it's been seven minutes since any of you were in contact with you classmates."

I had set a specific macro on my phone. Notifications were off, except for those of emails matching a specific pattern. Ten emails. Ten buzzes. Ten groups had a name submitted as VIP. And none of them done with their leader's knowledge.

A flurry of movement followed my words. Everyone grabbed their phones in a rush, panicking, even Kikyou and Horikita, who I hadn't informed about my plan. There were mutters and cries as it took time for the reboot sequence, before the inflow of messages and emails made every single device in the room buzz.

Countless vibrations, dings, and ringtones filled the room, as hundreds of messages, from every single group still ongoing came to the leaders here. Asking for advice, asking what to do, panicking, before they inevitably took the situation into their own hands.

There was only one person not staring at their phone but staring at me.

"Ayanokouji-kun. What did you do?"

I sighed, leaning back and closing my eyes to continue my nap.

"Check the school forums Ichinose. I'm sure what you find will be very interesting."

I didn't know whether she followed my instructions, but I assumed from the gasp of shock she did. All I could hear was frantic tapping and occasional questions between students in the same class, but I already knew what they would find.

VIP's
Rat: Kitou Hayato
Cow: Kobashi Yume
Tiger: Nishino Takeko
Rabbit: Yukimura Teruhiko
Dragon: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka
Snake: Albert Yamada
Horse: Inogashira Kokoro

Sheep: Oda Takumi
Monkey: Minamikata Kozue
Rooster: Yamamura Miki
Dog: Hamaguchi Tetsuya
Pig: Hashimoto Masayoshi

I had posted this the moment everyone's phones were off, from my pocket. It had been posted by me, someone who already had credit as a reliable source of leaked information, but that wasn't enough to trust random VIP's.

Soon enough though, everyone in the shool had seen it in a couple of minutes. Tensions would rise as they interrogated their group member, and as more and more groups ended, they would be more likely to believe it to be true.

It didn't help that two thirds of that list was correct. Students would see classmates they knew to be the VIP on there, and that would be enough evidence for some that everyone on the list was correct.

It was a downward spiral of fear of missing out that quickly got people to submit a name, believing the information to be true, before someone else in their group did.

It hadn't helped that they hadn't been able to coordinate or even contact the leaders for each class.

Things had worked out quite nicely for me.

It hadn't taken much word after my conversation this morning with Shiina. I had known two VIP's last night. Kouenji gave me a third, which led me to a fourth, Karuizwa. Amikura had given me a fifth and using them I had cold-read Shiina into figuring out the sixth, seventh and eighth. After that, the pattern was obvious.

"You actually did it, didn't you? Figured out the pattern. Bastard, interrupting my plans again." Ryuuen complained, less than impressed with my actions.

"Wait, Ryuuen, you actually believe all these names are true? Why would he give up his own classmates?"

"Are you retarded Kanzaki? Of course the Class D names are wrong, but he got all of mine right."

"You're going to admit that Ryuuen?"

"There's no purpose in lying any more, Katsuragi-kun. All the VIP's in Class C were correctly named, and their groups have ended. I guess Class D wins this one."

Shiina was looking downcast once again. It had been a tumultuous day for her, as someone who didn't do a lot, and it seemed this constant turn of things going wrong was too much for her to handle.

"He hasn't won yet. You hear me, Ayanokouji? I'm going to prove

that you're the VIP. Don't think you can win this group too."

I sighed again, fed up with Kanzaki's attitude. Being left alone as the sole leader had been mounting pressure on him, and now that the exam was for all intents and purposes over, all he had left was one chance to knock me down a rung.

"Do what you want. Honestly, this was just an experiment to me. I wanted to see how our respective classes would react without their leaders, so thank you for your participation."

"How can you treat this so... so clinically! This is our future, Ayanokouji-kun, and you're not even taking it seriously. An experiment... how disgraceful."

My actions had insulted Nishikawa, who for the first time spoke directly to me, before returning to ignoring my presence altogether. A majority of the group seemed to be sharing her opinion, but Ryuuen at least understood the value of the data I had aquired.

As expected, the students in our grade would act stupidly without us to guide them.

That was quite the productive session. Now I just had my meeting with Ryuuen and Shiina, who hopefully had forgiven me somewhat, thanks to my mercy.

Authors Notes:

So, it was physically painful to write this chapter. Poor Shiina.

If you haven't read Ender's Game, then 1. this chapter probably didn't make much sense and 2. GO READ IT NOW. It's a great book, and all the following books are great too (except for maybe Children of the Mind, that one was weird). Read the Shadow Saga, I absolutely loved that.

Aside from that, I really struggle to write group conversations. It's tempting to follow 'The White Room War' and just write crack for the chapters, but I do want to take this seriously, so I'm gonna keep chugging away.

This strategy, of publishing all the VIP's was actually the very original idea for this story. Originally, he was going to figure it out and post all of them correctly for shit's and giggles, but it's changed a lot and eventually became this. I hope you all enjoyed it, even though the group conversation is definitely lacking a bit.

Is it realistic for him to be able to figure out all the VIP's? Yes. Ryuuen did so in the Light Novel, if you don't remember, but only submitted the Class A ones. Thank god it was him who figured it out, because literally any other leader would have submitted them all and taken the potential 750 point swing. I mis-explained earlier, but if you submit nine correct names and all of your's are

incorrectly named, it does end up being a 750 point swing, at the very least. This exam is fucked.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 8 - A Brief Concord

It was still a place to drink, but I was glad to have a change of scenery. Despite how good the food was on this ship; it was getting tiresome of having meetings at every hour of the day in different restaurants. Constantly eating was getting tiresome at this point.

I grabbed an over-the-top mocktail from the student bar, before grabbing a seat at a table in the corner to wait for my guests. It was a marvellous fruity drink, complete with a little umbrella in the top. I didn't know who came up with that idea, but I would commend whoever it was. Little umbrellas were one of the world's greatest creations.

The bar was empty at the moment, as most of the grade was dealing with the results from an hour ago. Ten groups had ended in the space of seven minutes, and I still had no confirmed idea how the results would look.

Out of the ten submissions, only Miyaki of Sheep group had been fast enough to submit a correct name from our class. This was a surprise, as I had expected some of the more 'bold' students who didn't think things through to immediately submit a name, but it seemed that most of them had been beaten to the punch.

If I had to guess, I would think that Class C had the most submissions. Class B and A students were naturally more cautious, and neither classes would be as willing to trust my word to post a submission. Saying that, they also wouldn't want to miss out on such an opportunity, most specifically Class A who could take a risk that could either benefit them or humiliate Katsuragi even further. No, in number of submissions, I thought that Class C would have the most, followed by Class A and then Class B. The only question was who submitted the three incorrect names.

Unsurprisingly, Dragon group was still ongoing. None of them were either foolish enough or bold enough to submit my name after I was the one to post it, but I had to do so to perpetuate the narrative that I was the VIP.

It was getting increasingly risky though. Whether I could win Dragon group was coming further and further into doubt. Eight of the VIP's were correct on that list, and while there were only four people who knew which ones were wrong, it was still possible to

find the pattern using just those names. I could only hope my security would survive long enough to find a way to secure the group.

Although, losing Dragon group at this juncture wouldn't be terrible. It was an acceptable loss, as I had ensured that Class D had gotten enough points and the other classes had lost enough that it didn't really matter anymore.

But I wasn't going to simply give up.

Which led me to my current meeting.

"What the fuck do you want with us?"

I turned away from examining my drink, and banished my thoughts to the back of my mind to greet my two visitors. Ryuuen was walking towards me at a leisurely pace, although he didn't make any attempt to hide his presence from the room. Shiina was following quietly behind him, giving me a small smile as she did so.

"I wanted to get a drink. I'm sure your voice is dry after all that talking."

"Damn right it is."

He made a move to head towards the bar, before Shiina interrupted him, pushing him back towards the table as she went off to grab drinks for herself and Ryuuen.

He pulled out one of the chairs, rather aggressively, before dumping himself in it, completely relaxed.

No, he wasn't relaxed. More spent, as if he was fed up with everything.

"I can't believe I have to deal with such morons. How the fuck are they the best of our grade?"

"I thought you did a fairly good job. At least you never gave up."

Ryuuen snorted.

"Fat lot of good that did. Those retards can't figure out shit, I don't think they could possibly have made it easier for you. Bullshit, all of it."

"Even so, a commendable effort. I hope you don't feel bad for being unable to persuade sheep?"

Ryuuen had spent the seven minutes with our phones off, along with the time beforehand, in a constant rage against me. Not once had he ceased his arguments, constantly pointing out the problems with the situation, doing everything he could to fight against my inevitable moves, albeit in a rather aggressive manner. Yet he was unable to sway the group into not cooperating with me long enough to stop my plan.

That was probably why he had spent the next 50 minutes yelling at every person in the room.

Shiina returned to the table carrying a drink for herself and

Ryuuen, taking a seat in the last empty chair.

"Impressive work, Ayanokouji-kun. Your plan was masterfully executed."

"Thank you. I'm glad to see you're not upset."

She smiled at me; no hint of this morning's sadness left.

"It's how the competition works. Yes, I was hurt, but I suppose that's the price we pay for such an interesting school."

"Yes, yes, Shiina's kind enough to forgive you. Don't think that gets you off my shit list though."

I took a sip of my disgustingly sweet fruity mix, before responding to Ryuuen's insult.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about. Did you not like my gift?"

"Kukuku, no I'm ever so grateful for that, thank you oh so much for your supreme mercy, god of the school."

"He means thank you very much. I'd like to know though, what's your plan going forward?"

Thanks to Shiina's translation, I could tell that Ryuuen genuinely did accept my apology offer. Although it wasn't framed in that way, but as a method to get them to help me through a debt, if that's how Ryuuen was going to understand my actions then I wasn't going to complain.

"All that's left is Dragon group. We're going to get Class A to submit the wrong name."

"We?"

Ryuuen feigned surprise at my insistence that we would work together, but anyone could have figured out the reason for this meeting was an alliance.

"You know more VIP's than anyone but me. Unfortunately, it's not enough to find the pattern."

Shiina tilted her head at me. "You figured it out with only six names. I'm sure we can do it with nine," she confidently claimed.

"You're welcome to try, but I'll save you the effort. By a massive stroke of luck, there's two possible patterns that you can get from the nine names. Using the names I submitted from Class D will get you nowhere, but even trying with the remaining names, there's still a 50-50 in Dragon group. Me or Kikyou."

Of course one of those was far more realistic than the other, considering what sort of pattern a school would use, but it wasn't enough to completely count out the other name.

I wonder if the teachers knew the pattern, because this was an awfully useful coincidence. If the teachers had a hand in selecting the groups, and the must have in order to create Dragon group with the correct students from their classes, then Chabashira had purposefully created an ambiguous situation without anyone

realising in time.

Shiina thought for a while, before giggling to herself. She had obviously figured out the plan.

"What's so funny? He's asking for our help. You actually want to team up with this monster?"

"No, I'm sorry Ryuuen-kun, it's just... following the pattern from the eight correct names, including the fake VIP Albert, there's only one possibility for Dragon group: Horikita."

Yes, things had worked out marvelously.

A smile began to grow on the tyrants face once again as he realised what was going on.

"So, what you're saying is..."

"You were quite helpful by claiming that Albert was your VIP."

"Kukuku what a crazy plan. Seriously, how many fucking traps did you make? This is bullshit, it was actually doomed from the start, wasn't it?"

Ryuuen was lost in his own little world, laughing away at the situation I could force Class A into. There was just one problem with my reasoning, and I could see that Shiina had figured it out.

"Doesn't that mean that you're the VIP then, Ayanokouji-kun? I should submit your name right now. Yes, it would be good for Class A to lose, that would also be helping you."

In response I simply pulled out my phone and handed it over to the two of them after unlocking it. It was a stupid move normally, to give someone your unlocked phone, but they needed to be convinced it was mine, and that involved stumbling across all the little hints I had hidden for them to think it's mine.

"It gets better and better! Aha, what the fuck have you been doing. Is your brain even human, seriously, you monster?"

Ryuuen had stumbled, or more gone directly to the email from the school. Clear as day, he was reading the words in front of him.

After thorough consideration, you have not been chosen to be the VIP. Please remember to be a team player as your group tackles the challenges of this test. The exam begins today, and will be held over a period of three days. Members of the Dragon group should gather in the Dragon room located on the second deck.

"I suppose it really is your phone too. Not a single photo or video. You are a strange person, Ayanokouji-kun."

After reading the email, Shiina had snatched the phone off Ryuuen and gone snooping for evidence, reading through my sparse notes and going through my call's history. In the end though, they were forced to conclude that I was not the VIP.

"As you can see, neither Horikita, Kikyou or I received the right email. You'll never figure out whether it's Kikyou or me, not really.

Your best option is to make Class A lose."

Ryuuen leaned back, considering my words. He could take a gamble and still submit one of us, but technically I had cleared the three of us of being the VIP. The safest course of action was to follow my plan. The only question was whether he was willing to let this chance slide away.

Shiina though, had been going through my phone, and noticed an apparent oddity.

"Wait a minute, where's your spreadsheet."

"Huh? What spreadsheet?"

I didn't understand what Shiina was asking me.

"Your spreadsheet of the groups, dumbass. Are you actually saying you figured out the pattern in your head?"

"Yes? Didn't Shiina just do the same thing?"

The silver angel facepalmed, as Ryuuen laughed at the hilarity of my situation once again.

"You really don't understand the most basic shit, do you."

Just as I was about to ask my next question, Shiina's phone buzzed, causing her to panic and almost knock over her drink.

"Ah! I'm sorry, Ryuuen-kun, I agreed to meet with Ibuki-san right now. I need to get going." She quickly got up from her seat and grabbed her book bag that she brough everywhere with her. "It was good to talk again, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll see you for tonight's meeting."

Following in the pattern of her abrupt farewell, she almost ran out of the bar, hunting down the short haired girl from Class C.

"How did they become friends exactly?"

"I have no fucking idea. I think it's your fault, they bonded over their hatred of you."

I sighed. Aside from his joke of a guess, even Ryuuen couldn't fathom how the tsundere made a friend. We both had turned to watch her leave, before Ryuuen turned to lock back at me once more, lounging in his chair

"So, who else is on bored for this 'Fuck Class A' scheme you've got going on?"

It was important to coordinate so the people plotting didn't inadvertently block each other from reaching our shared goal. It was a fate that had happened in the past three meetings, and Ryuuen was sick of the same stuff happening again and again.

"Amikura and Ichinose, and obviously Horikita and Kikyou."

"Of course those two Class B bitches would be on board. After all..."

Ryuuen trailed off at a sudden realisation, and I groaned, closing my eyes and letting myself fall back into my chair as I did so too. I

hadn't had a chance to talk to anyone else in between this meeting and the group, so it would be obvious to Ryuuen that I already had an arrangement with Amikura and Ichinose. He could only make this connection though...

"Amikura went to you too."

"Kukuku so she actually tried to get all of us. I'm willing to bet she went to Katsuragi as well."

"Probably not with the 'make sure Class A comes last' stipulation, I'm sure."

Ryuuen collapsed in his chair from laughing, struggling to breathe as he realised what had been going on. While I had been interrogating Shiina, and solving the pattern, Ryuuen had been taking his time, slowly making progress in his own way. Kikyou had heard a rumour that he had been meeting with Katsuragi, so the two of them had probably come to an arrangement they wanted kept secret, one that I was sure favoured Ryuuen immensely somehow, yet Katsuragi thought was beneficial in the here and now. An arrangement I assumed was null and void now that I had messed everything up. And Amikura had been playing in her own way.

"KUKUKU she actually made a proper play! How adorable, it's so cute, the little devil of Class B did something bold."

"I don't know if devil is the right word. We already have one, and she doesn't quite live up to the title. How about 'Local witch who gives people warts'?"

Amikura was a chaotic soul, but she wasn't close to the devil that was Kikyou.

"Pftt, it's so cute, like a little baby learning to walk. She actually tried to pull a fast one on us."

I sighed again. I still had faith in Amikura, but this ploy of hers to get a deal with every class with the same information was a rather flimsy strategy. Still, it was something fresh, and I couldn't blame her for trying. The only thing Kanzaki had been doing was calling me constantly for the past two days. He needed to learn to stand on his own.

"She gave me far too much in our deal, but at least she tried. I suppose we can't count out Class B just yet."

"Kukuku I'll have fun playing with the little fae. She's got bigger balls than Kanzaki though, that's for sure. I wonder what mischief she'll get up to."

I had a decent amount of respect for Amikura, but Ryuuen clearly had no interest in taking her seriously. I could tell he found her at least interesting and entertaining, moreso than Horikita, although that was a fairly low bar right now, but he wouldn't consider her a

major threat, unlike myself, Sakayanagi, or even perhaps Ichinose, if she got herself together.

Clearly having nothing more to say, Ryuuen got up from his chair, leaving his half-finished drink sitting on the table and made his way towards the exit.

"Ryuuen."

He turned back and faced me as I called his name.

"What now?"

"I'm honestly surprised you got so worked up over Shiina. She's just one girl. You were more than happy to get Sudou suspended."

He sauntered back over to me; vicious grin plastered on his face.

"That's where you're wrong. Shiina's not just any girl, she's one of my girls. She's Class C. I don't give a fuck what you do to anyone else but touch my class and you make it personal."

"So, the dictator has a heart. The entire grade will jump for joy to hear it."

"You made Shiina cry. That's unforgivable. The first friend she ever made, and you turn around and use her for your own advantage."

"That's rather hypocritical of you Ryuuen. She knew what she was getting into."

"Tough. You crushed the soul of an angel. For that alone I'm going to crush you."

He leaded forward towards me, doing his very best to look intimidating. To anyone else, I'm sure they would have felt genuine fear.

"Things have gone well for you so far, Ayanokouji. I'll play ball for now, if only to knock Class A down a peg. But don't for a second think that people are going to just keep cooperating with your plans."

"Pride cometh before the fall."

"Yeah, that shit."

I stood up, facing Ryuuen eye to eye.

"You're an impressive man Ryuuen. Today alone was proof that I shouldn't count you out. I'm sure you can stand up there with the likes of Sakayanagi. But if you want some advice, test yourself first before coming after me."

He stared at me, the grin never leaving his face, before breaking apart the contest, throwing back his head laughing.

"Kukuku, you really are confident aren't you."

I didn't dignify him with a reply, instead choosing to sit down and turn my attention back to my drink. Apparently amused by my response, Ryuuen chuckled, before walking out of the bar, following the same path Shiina had walked minutes ago.

I had gotten what I wanted from the conversation, and I suspected Ryuuen had too. Perhaps he would take my warning seriously, but realistically, it only egged him on more. Sooner or later, we would be forced to face off. He hadn't done much this exam, but neither had anyone else as far as I knew. It was only the second day, but everything was over. I hadn't given the other classes a chance to win, not really. On the island too, Ryuuen hadn't gone all out against me, focusing his attention on Class A and his deal with them, along with Class B. No, we had never competed, the two of us, unhindered. Sooner or later, that would happen. But for now, all that was left was for me to secure my last part of the deal I made with Amikura, and seal the defeat of Class A.

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I didn't leave the bar though and continue to sit here enjoying my drink while I waited for my next guest to arrive.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that this school system was a political one, made of favours, deals, alliances and the stealing of information. When it came down it, most competition was done face to face through words, at least for me.

Even on the island exam most of my actions had been verbal, and my victories had been the result of outmanoeuvring the rest of the grade, not of a proper confrontation.

And that meant that I had to spend more and more time meeting people, usually over meals, in order to win the exam.

This meeting, though, had nothing to do with the current state of the exam, or Dragon group. No, I was waiting for Karuizawa.

"Hiya, Ayanokouji-kun!"

And here she was now, the incredibly social and outgoing girl suffering from a mild case of bullying.

"Hello, Karuizawa. Take a seat," I offered, gesturing at one of the two empty chairs left at the table. "Do you want something to drink."

"Nah, I'll be fine. Hey, is this going to take long? I have a meeting with some friends soon."

I took a sip of my quickly dwindling drink, before indicating to the barkeep that I'd like another. I had expected a little more gratitude, but I suppose that she showed up at all just for me is more than enough.

"No, it shouldn't take too long. First though, I wanted to congratulate you on winning Rabbit group." I took a sip of the new drink the bartender had placed in front of me, before looking back up at her. Sha was acting nervous and fidgety. Suspicious. "You did win, didn't you?"

"Ehe, I mean yeah, I think I did. I'm pretty sure one of the people

in Class B submitted Yukimura's name, I dunno, I wasn't really paying attention."

None of that explained the way she was acting so off. She hadn't done anything wrong, in fact that was exactly the result that should be celebrated.

"Um, Ayanokouji-kun... not that I'm not grateful or anything, cause really, thanks a lot, but... how did you know I was the VIP?"

Oh, right. That was supposed to be a secret to everyone in the class except Hirata.

"Hirata told me."

"Eh?! He did? He said he wasn't going to tell anyone."

I sighed, doing my best to act the concerned friend.

"Yukimura mentioned you were acting a bit off in your group. I had to pressure Hirata a bit, but eventually he told me that you were the VIP."

She wagged a finger at me, although she didn't seem to be concerned that I had been told. Probably because it had let me win her 500,000 points.

"Ne, that's no good Ayanokouji-kun. You shouldn't be mean like that to people."

"You aren't upset?"

She shrugged. "Hirata wasn't able to help me. He's not even my boyfriend anymore. I only told him because he would have figured it out anyway, so I don't really mind."

I took another sip of my drink, almost wincing at how sweet it was. This was a positive development, if she was telling the truth. Karuizawa had already started to push away Hirata, so it wouldn't take much more for me to finish the job.

"So, was that all you wanted to talk about then?"

"No, actually. You being the VIP doesn't clear up all the strange occurrences in Rabbit group."

She stiffened at my words, as I got closer to something she wanted to keep hidden.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Let me make it clear then. Yukimura said you were avoiding three girls in particular – Manabe, Yabu and Yamashita."

"Just wait a moment, there's—

"When I asked him about them, Yukimra claimed you were doing your best to avoid them. That seemed strange to me, so I asked Hirata about it again."

"And there's no way he told you—

"You're being bullied, Karuizawa."

She stopped speaking, eyes darting around the room in a panic, making sure that no one had heard what I said. Her breath had

increased, almost to hyperventilating levels.

"No, no I don't know what you're talking about, whatever Hirata said it's not true, it's a lie, I'm not—

"It's ok. I'm not going to tell anyone."

Her hands shook on the table, as she tried in vain to recompose herself back into the gyaru student everyone knew. I didn't say anything, but sat there quietly allowing her time to think, to calm herself down.

Eventually, I called over a drink for her, which despite her earlier dismissal, she took without complaint, gulping down the sugary liquid as fast as possible. It was a general rule to distract someone with an object when they were panicking. Usually sticking an ice cube in their mouth would calm someone down effectively, but a drink would have to suffice for now.

"If you tell anyone...

"I won't. I know you were relying on Hirata for help, but ever since the island he hasn't left his room."

She looked down at her hands, clasped around the drink, condensation drips rolling down her thin fingers.

"I don't know what's going on with you, and I don't need to know. But Hirata isn't... functioning properly right now, so if you ever need someone to help you, I'll be there."

She looked up, a barely-there hint of hope back in her eyes.

"You mean it?"

"I do. I understand if you don't trust me, but if there's ever a time you need someone, send me a message and I'll come."

She smiled again, finally, similar to the one she gave me two days ago the last time we spoke. A genuine smile, unlike the fake ones most of our grade had.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. But it's not like I'll need your help anyway. It's just one thing, really, it's not even bullying, they're probably just jealous. Like, can you imagine someone as hot as me getting bullied? Jeez, you should stop worrying about stupid things. I've, like, got this totally under control. Everything's fine, really."

"I'm sure you do," I answered drily. She wouldn't have come close to panicking that much if everything was under control.

"Anyway, I have to go meet Shinohara-san now. Thanks again for winning the exam, Ayanokouji-kun. Good luck in Dragon group, bye now!"

I felt almost ill after that goodbye. It was pure suffering to live through, but that was how she acted, how all the top girls in the great interacted together.

She left the bar, and now, finally, I was finished for the day.

I was surprised the conversation had gone that well. I had been

fully expecting Karuizawa to try to run, to not break down or deny everything. It was unexpected that she would open up that much to me, or even break down at just the mention of bullying. Either her fear ran deeper than I suspected, or she trusted me more than I thought. Most likely, it was a combination of both.

It probably helped that I mentioned Hirata. He had been the one she trusted before, and I had shaped the conversation as if he handed over the mantle of protecting Karuizawa to me, not the truth that I forcibly took it from him. Her believing I was working with Hirata was quite possible the only reason that conversation had gone so well, why she even trusted me.

The situation was out of my hands, at least for now. Rabbit group was over, and so were the chances for the three girls to confront Karuizawa about their issues. It would be much harder for them to find her now, since they didn't have a set time where she would be somewhere, but I didn't think they would just give up. No, more likely they would redouble their efforts to find her over the next day or two, knowing she could hide in her cabin for the rest of the trip if it got to be too much.

Their window of opportunity was limited, and I could help them out, but I most likely wouldn't have to. All I could do was hope that when they finally did confront her, either someone noticed and I heard about it early enough, or Karuizawa had enough faith in me to call for help.

I also needed it to happen before Hirata got involved, but as long as he continued to focus on Horikita there was a good chance he wouldn't get to Karuizawa in time.

Yes, this situation was shaping up rather nicely.

Authors Notes:

So, last chapter was recieved with mixed reviews. Some very valid criticism that I quite enjoyed reading. It was good to see people pointing out things like that, because yeah I fucked up. Biggest thing was Ayanokouji caring about Shiina's feelings. I will defend Papa-Ryuuen until the day I die, but yes, Ayanokouji wouldn't give a shit. What happened was I let my personal feelings get into the writing, because it hurt me to write, not him. That was a mistake, I appreciate people pointing it out and it won't happen again, hopefully. This chapter fixed some of that up, or gave it more depth or whatever.

Karuizawa accepting Ayanokouji here. Realistic? Maybe. I can see it (especially since I wrote it) although i can also understand if some people think it's a leap. Bit iffy but I'm going with it. Bear in mind she's only going on about this one case right now with

Manabe, not her entire history of bullying. That at least I feel is a fair reaction.

Gonna be honest, I have kind of been sidlining Ryuuen in Ayanokouji's thoughts, even though I have put him up as still a powerful opponent. Also did my best to rectify that, because again the criticism was right, Ryuuen is highly competent. That just makes me question the Light Novels though, because Ryuuen is insistent that Ichinose is a dangerous enemy, even though she really never did stuff, at least that we saw. Her class even fell for his attacks in volume 2, so I have to disagree with the canon there.

Amikura isn't an all knowing god who can match up to the top dogs of ANHS. She's someone above average, who wants to take a chance to make moves. I'd rank her somewhere above Horikita, but below Ichinose in this fic. She's around, and does stuff, but she really hasn't done anything worth respect, at least not yet.

That's all for now. As always, hope you enjoyed! I'm going back to consuming millions of words of Code Geass fanfics now.

Arc 4 Chapter 9 - Finishing Touches

The second meeting for the day was over. After the dramatic events of the mornings meeting, not much was done. Dragon group was the only one that hadn't finished yet, and no one wanted to start another big conversation or VIP hunt, with a healthy level of caution. Who knew what could go wrong next?

Class A had holed themselves up in a corner together, muttering and going over stuff on their phones, with pen and paper on hand for notes. Clearly, they were doing their best to figure out the pattern, and at this rate it wouldn't be long before they did.

I hadn't spoken to Shiina about books, but we did have a short chat about how odd this school really is. As someone who never went to an ordinary school before, it was fascinating to hear about just the slight differences that existed between here and middle school. Just by adding in a competitive element, the nature of high school had changed significantly, or so she said.

Aside from my brief conversation with her, most of the group had played cards for most of the session. Even Ryuuen had joined in, proving himself to be rather masterful when it came to poker, since he found losing a hand just as entertaining as winning. It was virtually impossible to tell how he felt about a hand, since every single one of them was just as entertaining to him. An infuriating development, but impressive, nonetheless.

Kanzaki joined us as well, surprisingly, although I could tell he was chaffing to get something done. Every now and then, he would make a move to speak, or to ask a question, but Amikura and Ichinose were right on top of him to hold him back. I had explained the situation and the plan, and with both of them agreeing it was within the confines of our earlier deal, they made sure to keep their class silent, letting Class A do the work for us.

At this point it was only a matter of time, although they could use a prod.

Somehow though, I had gone from making complex decisions to one of the dullest events of my life.

I was having a late dinner with Matsushita, Mori and Satou.

"Ah this place is amazing! I've never had lobster before!"

"It's been quite a while since I last had it, but this is rather good."

"Eh? You've had lobster before Matsushita?"

"Aha, I mean only once a few years ago, ehe..."

We were in the highest-class restaurant on the ship, one which was usually filled with students exclusively from Class A and B. A stigma had grown around it, as a place only for the superior students. I could hear mutters from around us as we ate, but since we were some of the more well-mannered students of Class D, there weren't any problems.

I had heard that Ike and Yamauchi had been thrown out earlier in the week.

"And Ayanokouji-kun is so brave in Dragon group! Ah, you're standing up to all the scary people and not backing down," Satou exclaimed.

"Yeah! You even said you were the VIP, and no one submitted your name! It's incredible!"

Mori and Satou had apparently started my very own fan club right now, with the number of members amounting to two.

It was understandable, since not much info had been leaked from what was going on in Dragon group most of the grade was in the dark. Of course, some rumours had spread, since the leaders had to plan and had probably asked for advice on what to do, but no one from our class had said a word. Most of the rumours probably hadn't made it to their ears yet, except for the fantastical one where Ryuuen tried to chop my head off with a butcher's cleaver. That one was from earlier today but had made the rounds very quickly.

"It's not that surprising. No one would believe that someone would honestly tell the grade their own VIP's. Besides," and Matsushita's eyes took on a terrifying glint, "I heard that you told everyone you were the VIP on the very first day."

That was the only rumour I had come across that was actually true.

"Aha there's no way he did that!"

"No, it's true. I told them I was the VIP."

Three shocked faces stared back at me, a bit of lobster spilling out of Mori's open mouth.

"What! But you're the VIP! How the hell does that even work?!"

"Calm down Satou-san. They obviously can't submit his name if he's the one to say it. Ayanokouji-kun is playing super smart mind games."

Careful Matsushita. You're getting close to admitting that you're hiding your intelligence.

"But what if they did submit your name? Don't you think that's too risky?"

I leaned forward, placing my knife and fork down on my plate having finished eating.

"Can you three keep a secret?"

Satou and Mori nodded emphatically, excited at the chance to be inducted into a hidden truth. These girls lived for gossip and secrets, there was no way they would say no, even if it was the truth.

"Ooo, have you got a sneaky plan Ayanokouji-kun?"

"It's pretty simple, Matsushita. I'm not the VIP. Horikita is."

Satou gasped, pointing at me in shock.

"So this entire time—

"Sshh, Satou-san. We don't want the other classes to know," Mori mollified her, Satou having the decency to look embarrassed.

"Oops sorry. But this entire time, you've been lying?" She whisper-asked.

"Horikita came up with that actually. So, you see, there's no need to worry. No one thinks that Horikita is the VIP, so either they submit my name, or we get Option One or Two. Either way we can't lose."

Mori clasped her hands together, eyes sparkling with admiration.

"Ah, amazing! Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san are incredible!"

"Yeah, you two really are amazing. Especially Ayanokouji-kun. When you were standing up to the other leaders on the island, wow!"

Once again, Matsushita had to make a shushing motion with her mouth, in order to stop the secret spilling out. These two, while they did understand the necessaries of keeping something like that quiet, would probably have trouble keeping it to themselves. I was starting to reconsider whether it was worth letting them in after all.

We finished our meals talking about different topics, making sure to stay away from talk about the VIP. Everyone else was done, but I still had a hint of lobster left to be dug out, when I made my move.

"Would you two mind going off on your own? I want to have a word with Matsushita in private."

Both Mori and Satou looked a little shocked for a moment before their expressions turning suggestive.

"Oh, we wouldn't want to get in the way, would we Satou-san?"

"No no not at all. We'll leave you two together. Don't do anything naughty～"

Teasing us to the last, they linked arms and practically bounced out of the restaurant together, laughing as they did. I was sure they would interrogate Matsushita the moment she left my side, but I couldn't care less at this point. Maezono had probably already mentioned my midnight rendezvous with Kikyou, so it couldn't possibly get any worse at this point. Right?

Once they had disappeared from our sight, Matsushita turned to

me, and I had a feeling in my gut that this would be a trying conversation.

"So, what could you want with me, Ayanokouji-kun? A nice dinner, just the two of us. Could it be... a confession?" she batted her eyelashes at me, leaning forward with slightly puckered lips.

"Please take this seriously. I need your help to win Dragon group."

Matsushita leaned back, grouchy look on her face as she did so.

"Ugh, there's no need to ignore me like that. What, am I not pretty enough?"

"Hardly. I simply don't care."

She blushed slightly at my inadvertent compliment, whilst simultaneously looking insulted at my lack of interest, an impressive feat only one self-assured enough could pull off.

"Jeez, I was just teasing you. You know those two will ask questions, right? What do you want me to say, you're not interested in women? Do you have any idea how many hearts you'll break?"

That would break people's hearts? I couldn't understand such base logic.

"Just tell them I was asking what to do with Kikyou. There's enough rumours going on that one more can't possibly hurt."

"Hmm? And is there something going on?" she asked, leaning forward inquisitively, all previous traces of insult gone.

I sighed. It was getting rather bothersome, constantly being questioned about our relationship. Perhaps when I had a stable understanding in a couple of days, I might actually be able to answer. Right now, I was loath to label what she was to me.

"There's nothing there. She's just a friend."

"Hmm. If you say so. Anyway, what did you need my help for?"

"Ah right. Well—

"Ah!"

As I was about to speak, I accidentally bumped the table reaching for my knife and fork to pick at the remains of my meal. As I did so, my glass of water fell off the table, spilling onto a passing waiter.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wet you."

"Not a problem sir. I'll have this cleaned up in no time."

The waiter had given a loud cry that turned a few heads, but it seemed everyone was passing it off as simply an event that occurred when out in a restaurant. It wasn't uncommon for someone to knock over a glass.

Once he was gone, I turned back to Matsushita, who looked slightly amused at the situation.

"I didn't know you were that clumsy."

"I suppose accidents happen to everyone."

I sadly looked at my plate of food, realising there was nothing left for me to eat. I could have sworn there was one last piece of lobster left inside the shell just before...

Ah. Matsushita was chewing something.

"So? What do you need me to do?"

I guess we were ignoring my food being stolen. It was just one more occurrence at this point, I was beginning to give up on the idea of eating an entire meal myself.

"I need you to make sure that those two spread our secret around. Specifically, to Class A."

The smart-girl-pretending-to-be-dumb instantly realised my plan, eyes glinting as she recognised her own role.

"Horikita isn't the VIP, is she?"

"No, but the evidence is starting to point that way. A couple of Class D students mentioning their leaders have been hiding the true VIP would go a long way to giving the theory credibility."

"And you chose those two because they were notorious gossips."

"Did you really think I just wanted to go out to dinner with you three?"

I had no interest in sitting through a dull dinner with three people who cared more about shopping than any scheming in the slightest. Eating with Horikita would be a more enjoyable time. At least she was stimulating.

"And you need me to make sure they spill the secrets around Class A students."

"You're not just a pretty face, Matsushita. I know you hide it, but you're pretty smart, smart enough to get the secret to the right people." I paused, considering a strange development in this conversation. "You don't seem bothered that I just manipulated your friends."

"Should I be? If this is what it takes to get to Class A, then that's their role to play. It's clear they can't do much else."

It was a cruel attitude from someone who purposed themselves as the two girls' friend, but it was honest. At least she wasn't lying about their potential, and they probably knew it as well. At least they could be useful, in some way, which was more than a lot of the members of this class.

"You stick by them because they're ordinary?"

"Aha, but you see, I'm just an ordinary girl as well. I just want to hang out with my friends and get through school, that's all there is to it."

Was that the truth? Matsushita was an impressive liar, having gotten away as a slightly above average student for the past few months. I didn't know her well enough to tell if that was true or not.

She was incredibly self-assured for someone who believed that, so I was inclined to doubt her words. But I knew that's all she was going to tell me.

What a deceitful witch.

"How'd you pull that off though? I heard that Horikita showed her phone in the group, so I guess you must have switched. Did she really get away lying like that?"

"It's a little-known thing, but you can actually change the sim card in a phone. So, when they called 'her' phone..."

"It actually rang. Incredibly, you really did plan for everything." She seemed genuinely impressed with my strategy, even though she didn't know everything that had happened in detail. I suppose to someone who had proven to be able to at least challenge me with mind games, Cow group must have been incredibly dull.

"Anyway, that's the gist of it. You just need to make sure the right people hear what's happening."

I received a smirk in response.

"Don't worry, you can count on me. I'll do my part for the class. God knows, no one else is."

I shrugged. "I'm not particularly bothered by it. Not everyone is capable of helping. If Horikita and I have to drag us to Class A alone, I guess we'll give it our best shot."

She giggled, amused at my nonchalant attitude to the dead weights in the class.

"So confident. Are you sure you don't want to go on a date?" she offered, in her best flirtatious voice.

"I can't even tell if you're being serious at this point."

"Eh, why not? You're definitely a worthy match, and I'm no slouch. We could both do a lot worse."

"So, a political romance. How dreary." She froze at my words. My joke seemed to have invertedly stumbled across something important.

"I'd rather you than whoever my father picks for me," she admitted quietly. There was some tension in the Matsushita family apparently, but I had no interest in getting involved. At least she had two and a half years before she had to deal with that again.

"Sorry, but I'm not interested. Now go on, catch up to your friends. I'm sure they're dying to get all the gossip from you."

She smirked again; all trace of her previous melancholy gone. It seemed this was all still a game to her, one which I had no intention of playing. I already had a queen unconsciously trapped at my side; I had no need for a less valuable person like Matsushita.

"Ah fine. But just for that, I'm going to tell everyone big lies about

you and Kushida-san."

"Change it to Ryuuen at least. I'm sure he'll find it very funny."

She didn't respond, but I could hear her cackling as she walked away from me.

Now, the trap was set. The only question was whether I would be betrayed, or would the intended victim walk right into it.

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"Why did you ask to see me?"

I turned around to see the face of Class D's indifferent homeroom teacher. Chabashira Sae.

Most of the students had gone to bed long ago, meaning that out here, on the deck of the ship, it was just the two of us. I had called her here to answer not only some questions I had about this exam, but also another topic entirely.

"I'm sorry for calling you so late."

"An instructor is obligated to consult with a student. It's nothing out of the ordinary. Besides, how can I ignore my favourite student when they ask for me."

Teachers weren't supposed to have favourite students, but every class did yet the same. Hoshinomiya had a childish attitude with love and support for Ichinose. Sakagami ignored most of Ryuuen's antics, believing him beneficial for Class C's success. And I was the sole student in Class D not to receive Chabahsira's ire.

"There's something I wanted to ask you, sensei, but... You know, you look pale."

At first, I hadn't noticed because it was dark, but Chabashira-sensei looked so pale that I thought she might be deathly ill.

"Don't worry about it. Adult issues. Anyway, what did you want to ask?"

Considering I could smell the alcohol on her breath, I thought I had the situation well figured out.

"Celebrating our victory?"

"Catching up with some old friends."

She didn't elaborate, but there was a lot to take away from that statement. The only people Chabashira could be close enough to on this ship were the other teachers in our grade. It seemed they were rather close, and had been for some time. That actually led me into my question for later.

"Did you know the pattern for choosing the VIP's ahead of time?"

She narrowed her eyes looking at me, attempting to school her face as much as possible for someone under the influence of alcohol, no matter how little. These were dangerous questions to be asking and could potentially have serious consequences for her if she answered carelessly.

"Yes, we are aware of the pattern. The school hasn't changed it in years. Most special exams are cycled on a three-year basis, so no grade can spoil it, but the Island and Zodiac exams are done for every first year cohort."

That was interesting to know. What that meant was any students keeping an eye on our grade from grades above, specifically Nagumo and Manabu, would have a good idea of what happened, knowing what exams we did.

Chabashira continued speaking while I was pondering this new information I had been provided.

"No one has ever figured out the pattern as quickly as you though, Ayanokouji-kun. At least no one has and used it. I'm very impressed. Another great victory."

"You realise we could have won with a much larger margin, don't you? And Dragon group isn't even over."

She brushed off my concerns however, understanding the situation I was in.

"You have your own reasons for doing things. I've seen the submissions, and while I can't tell you anything, the outcome of Dragon group won't affect the overall result too much. You've done well enough."

She probably shouldn't have told me that, but it confirmed what I had all but known to be fact myself. The exam had gone exactly as predicted.

"Chabashira. Did you purposefully put Kikyou and I in Dragon group, knowing how it would affect things?"

This was something I had been curious about. Yes, it made sense putting us both there, especially if the leaders were grouped on purpose, but it was still a huge advantage. Without knowing the VIP's from the rest of our class, it became impossible to determine the pattern, and even if it matched for every other class, there were still two possibilities that could be used, each resulting in a different student in Dragon group. Knowing just one of our VIP's would clear up the ambiguity, but even so, it was far too big of a handicap for it to be random.

"I don't know what you're talking about. If such an advantage happened, then it would be best to accept it quietly and move on," she warned me. I still wasn't sure if Chabashira had played a part in ensuring that I had such an advantage to work with, but the message was clear:

Forget about it and move on.

"Fine. I actually had another question I wanted to ask you."

But before I could do so, I felt the presence of someone else nearby.

"Yoohoo, Sae-chan! How you feeling?"

Hoshinomiya arrived. Was it just a coincidence? Unlikely. She'd probably followed Chabashira.

"You're drunk, aren't you?" Chabashira said.

"Hmm? Oh no, of course I'm not, I'm not drunk. I was just acting all sleepy, you know?"

"Jeez. You can really hold your liquor. You handled yourself today, and you're fine now, too."

Apparently, Hoshinomiya had an iron liver.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun. How are you doing?"

It seemed I had an abundance of luck tonight.

"Hoshinomiya. I've been celebrating the crushing defeat of Class B."

Chabashira shot me a warning as I began to antagonise the Class B teacher, but I ignored it completely. Hoshinomiya, to her credit, simply brushed off my words.

"Ne, that's not nice, Ayanokouji-kun. Everyone's playing to get along, after all! It's all fun and games, right?"

"That's true from a certain point of view. But perhaps I should take a vested interest in targeting Class B from now on."

That got a slight reaction. Her eyes narrowed, and while she didn't drop the act, a few cracks appeared in her mask.

I had been suspicious about her since the end of the Island Exam. For a class doing so well, moving up to take the place of Class A next semester, she should have been overjoyed. And yet, she was more upset than Mashima and Sakagami combined, both of which had been crushed. Something was off, and I intended to find out why. Hopefully, though she seemed to have an incredible tolerance for alcohol, I'd be able to break her down now.

"Haha, again not nice. Mou, you really don't like Class B, do you. Hmm, but are you sure you can do it? We've got some pretty feisty people there, hi-ya!"

She made a mockery of a fighting stance, throwing punches into the air.

"Ayanokouji-kun, I think it would be best if you go to bed. I'll make sure that Hoshinomiya doesn't get into any more trouble."

"It's fine, sensei. Don't you think that Hoshinomiya should know her class is doomed to become Class D in the end?"

That did it. Finally, she broke a bit, and a flash of something darker took over the drunk woman's face, before she brought it back under control.

"Oo, but Class B did so well on the island. I dunno, you might be counting us out too fast, Ayanokouji-kun. We'll definitely put up a fight."

"Class B only survived utter destruction because I intervened. Their success had nothing to do with the pathetic leadership of Kanzaki and Ichinose."

"Were you not aware of what happened, Chie? You really need to pay better attention to your own class, or I might overtake you." Chabashira, realising I had no intention of backing off, seemed to have decided to join my offensive to break Hoshinomiya.

Hoshinomiya moved faster than I had expected an inebriated person to be able to, lunging forward and grabbing Chabashira by the collar and pushing her against the wall.

"You think you can make it out of Class D? Pathetic. You belong with those defectives *Sae-chan*."

"I'm pretty sure assaulting a teacher is a violation of school rules, Hoshinomiya."

She turned to me, and realising what position she was in, converted it into a tight hug for Chabashira.

"Hehe, don't worry Ayanokouji-kun. Sae-chan and I just like to play together."

"Please get off me, Chie. I'm trying to help my student, and you're getting in the way."

Hoshinomiya let go of Chabashira and turned to me instead, wrapping her arms around me.

"Hmph, Sae-chan's no fun. Ne, Ayanokouji-kun. Wouldn't you like to have a teacher who treats you a little better? Sae-chan's such a meanie, but I'm sure Class B would love to have you. You know, I keep hearing Honami-chan and her little friends talk and plot about you, I'm sure they'd be happy if you joined us instead～"

What even was this attempt? If she honestly thought I'd be willing to switch classes after what I had witnessed, she was sorely mistaken. Perhaps the alcohol had affected her judgement slightly, because none of that was accurate. And I had no idea what she meant about Ichinose being pleased to see me swap classes. There wasn't a lot of love lost between us right now, and if she was trying to imply something else, I didn't understand it at all.

"Please let go of me, Hoshinomiya."

Pouting, she released me from her constrictive hold, and the moment she had done so, Chabashira was there, and grabbed Hoshinomiya by the nape of her neck and dragged her off.

I waited a while longer, but it didn't seem like Chabashira was going to return, probably busy dealing with a worse off Hoshinomiya.

I was surprised that she had cracked so easily. I also hadn't been expecting such a change in personality.

Much like Kikyou, she pretended to be the opposite of who she

was. She had taught us in class, and the entire time she had given off a bubbly, ditzy vibe, of someone who didn't take anything really seriously, who lived in a world where everything was fun. I hadn't even suspected how strange that was until the Island Exam, where her actions completely contradicted that nature.

Chabashira and Hoshinomya shared a past. I didn't know any more than that, but they had a grievance with each other, and were competing to sort it out by seeing whose class would reach the top. That was why Chabashira had gambled so much on me, risking her job just to win. It wasn't about winning but beating Hoshinomiya.

Being drunk had its disadvantages. She may have a strong tolerance to alcohol, but she was inevitably disorientated by it, at least slightly. She had made mistakes, breaking through at our taunting, much quicker than she should have. If not inebriated, it was likely I never would have seen through the fake child-like Hoshinomiya the world saw. She was an even better actor than Kikyou.

It was a stupid mistake for Hoshinomiya to get angry, but now that I knew this, it would be far easier to push her buttons. Class B had an unexpected weakness I could exploit.

Authors Notes:

Right, there's been a bit of discourse on the past couple of chapters, it's all great stuff, good arguments and shit, fun to read.

But y'all really hate Karuizawa jesus. She has a role to play, and y'all really want her to literally die at this point.

As for this chapter, I'm trying to include some of the other characters in Class D. The novels were never that great at expanding on multiple people in the class, as in they'd introduce someone and then move on, so honestly I've been taking inspiration from Self Test, which I'm sure everyone will agree is the greatest CotE fanfic ever written. Objectively. I've been looking to that for ideas to improve, cause honestly that's a masterpiece.

I don't believe Hoshinomiya has ever really shown a dark side in the novels, can't quite remember, but i don't for a second believe that shitty attitude she has. It's definitely an act, and so i decided to explore that, even just a little. Unrealistic that she broke that early? Maybe, but i think it's justified enough.

Getting closer to the end of this arc. To be honest this has been a harder one to write, since the climax is mostly over for now. The big event happened in chapter 7, and there's still heaps of shit to go, but it feels a little anticlimactic after that. Not to say it isn't good and enjoyable, but i kinda hit the peak for the arc early. It was necessary with how the story flowed, but still feels a bit weird.

Gonna do my best to avoid that for now.

Got distracted finally watching Shimoneta. What a weird fucking anime, holy shit i couldn't stop laughing. Highly recommend if you're bored.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 10 - The Watcher

"What do you get out of this, Ayanokouji?"

Kanzaki posed a question at me while we were in our group meeting. It was the morning of the third day of this exam, but that only mattered for the fourteen students still having to participate.

"In what sense?"

"I can't understand your logic. Do you want to get to Class A? It would explain why you put so much effort in on the island, but if that's the case you wasted an opportunity here to get even more points, just for fun. It makes no sense."

My reasoning seemed to baffle Kanzaki, who was sitting across from me in the group circle and had been staring at me for the past 55 minutes.

"Kukuku, you really don't get it, do you?"

He turned to Ryuuen, who had interjected himself into our conversation finding Kanzaki's confusion amusing enough for his attention.

"And you do, Ryuuen? Please, enlighten me."

The tyrant leaned forward, vicious grin plastered on his face like always.

"Not everyone thinks the same, retard. You might want to get to Class A, but what's to say that everyone else does."

"Huh? I can't see a reason for someone to not want to get to Class A. It's illogical. Are you claiming that you don't care what Class you end school as?"

It wasn't correct, since I did have an interest in reaching Class A, but Ryuuen raised a very valid point. Kanzaki was too narrow minded to possibly understand the actions of others, which is why he would never be able to beat Ryuuen.

"You're actually retarded, aren't you? Can't even entertain the possibility that someone would have a different reason than you, but you tried to do some shitty little psychoanalysis anyway. Kukuku you really are stupid."

That was the point. Kanzaki couldn't understand the fundamental difference between people, not enough to predict their actions. People who didn't follow logical choices, like Ryuuen and I, would always be beyond him, because we would do things that he wouldn't consider since they made no sense. Things like admitting

we were the VIP, or giving up on the island test.

"That doesn't explain Ayanokouji's reasons for his actions. All it means is that he might think differently."

Ryuuen facepalmed at the unyielding nature of the man he was debating. Kanzaki seemed incapable of understanding the point that Ryuuen was making. Ryuuen wasn't trying to explain my actions, he was trying to explain that there was no point in Kanzaki trying to understand them.

"Kanzaki-kun, everyone has a different reason for doing things. Sometimes it's hard to understand that, and you just have to accept that."

"That's something I can't do, Kushida. Ayanokouji, and you, are my opponents at this school. If we're going to compete, then I need to understand how you think."

I sighed. He raised valid points, but refused to accept that his goal was impossible. I had two main focuses: win the class competition, while causing as many problems as possible. Those two seemed to be contradictory, which is why Kanzaki wouldn't be able to reconcile them.

"Don't bother trying, Kanzaki-kun. I've sat next to him for the entire year, and he's an idiot. You can't understand Ayanokouji-kun, and I've given up trying."

Horikita came to my defense with the best solution to Kanzaki's quandary. Just give up, she said.

"Yep, I don't understand him either, I just go with whatever happens. It's easier that way."

The entire group this time seemed shocked, even Ryuuen. To see both my classmates, especially Kikyou, who some people knew we had worked closely together, claim that I couldn't be understood was surprising. To have the faith and support of classmates, even if they couldn't trust or predict my actions in any way was a ridiculous situation.

"Kushida-san... even you don't understand what he's doing?"

"Nope! Not a clue! It's more fun that way, hehe" she answered Ichinose.

"Kukuku to think even your classmates don't understand. You see now, Kanzaki? Just give up and plan to react. Life's more fun that way."

Ryuuen was capable of making complex successful plans, like the one on the island, but I could tell he was intelligent and creative enough to plan on the fly, reacting to a changing situation. Everyone in here could do that to some degree, but because some of us based our strategies around 'wait and see and react', planning became a much more difficult task.

Having a plan ahead of time, and sticking to it was always a good strategy, but only if you had some degree of understanding of how your opponent would react. And if Kanzaki couldn't understand Ryuuen and I, then, like Jazz, we would relax, go with the flow, find a mistake and exploit the situation, the plan falling apart in a moment.

"Hmm, but we've gotten off topic. I believe the original question was what do you get out of this, Ayanokouji-kun," Amikura asked?

"I get a chance to cleanse my soul by working hard for others," I joked.

"Literally, not metaphysically please," Katsuragi interjected. It seemed even the Class A students had an interest in the conversation, taking a break from their muttered arguments.

"Who knows?"

There was a lot of grumbling at my answer, but everyone at least had the sense to understand I wasn't going to explain. To be honest I didn't even quite know myself anymore. There were a few reasons, and they were slowly changing every day I spent here.

The topic shifted, but as it did so, my phone buzzed as I got a message. Opening it up, I saw it was the thing I had been waiting for, a message I had been hoping to receive for a while.

"Help"

Karuizawa was in trouble. Finally, although she probably didn't trust me, the box had closed in around her enough that she was willing to risk reaching out to me. Manabe and her friends were close, she couldn't turn to her friends, and Hirata wasn't someone she thought she could rely upon anymore. In the end, I was the only option she had left.

I quickly replied to her, then put my phone away before anyone could notice. Two minutes were left in our group meeting, and until that was over, there was no way I could help.

"Ayanokouji-kun, why were you asking how to take Ryuuen-kun on a date?"

The room fell quiet again at Shiina's innocent words, all eyes turning to me.

"I have no idea what you're talking about Shiina."

"Really? Oh, I'm sorry. I overheard some girls talking about it this morning. I didn't want to make assumptions, but they seemed pretty sure you were asking that." Shiina looked down at my response, seemingly disappointed at my answer.

"Ayanokouji. What the fuck? Have you done?" Ryuuen's eye's bore into me, burning with the rage of a thousand suns.

"I didn't do anything, honest. Someone must have started a rumour as a prank."

"Eh, don't be shy, Ayanokouji-kun. There's nothing wrong with liking Ryuuen-kun. It's pretty hot when you think about it~"

"Ah! Mako-chan stop it!"

The entire room had devolved into giggling and blushing at the thought of Ryuuen and I together. I had no idea what they were talking about, and tilted my head in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Ahaha, you and Ryuuen-kun... together intimately ahahaha"

"I still don't understand."

The room went quiet very quickly, everyone sobering at my words. I didn't understand at all what was so funny about Ryuuen and I being together. And intimate? That made no sense at all. Why would a guy and a guy be together?

"Do... do you not get it?"

"Kiyotaka-kun, have you never heard of... the birds and the bees?"

"You're implying sexual relations, aren't you? How does that work with Ryuuen?"

"Hmm, yes I'm quite curious as well, Ayanokouji-kun. I don't understand what you are all talking about," agreed Shiina, just as confused as me.

A baffled silence filled the room, with no one responding, but staring at the two of us, jaws open in shock.

"No one... ever speaks of this again."

"Agreed."

"Kushida-san, you're close to Ayanokouji-kun. Could you explain it to him later?"

"Me!? W-why would I talk about that! Why don't you do it Ichinose-san!"

"N-no I couldn't possibly. Ah, Kanzaki-kun, you're a guy, you can do it!"

The entire room devolved into simultaneously agreeing to never speak of this, while trying to convince someone to explain what was going on to Shiina and I. I met her eyes, and she simply shrugged, bemused by the situation going on around us.

I could feel death radiating off of Ryuuen right now. Keeping away from him would be a good decision for my health.

Of course, I understood the concept of sexual reproduction, and I knew that it was something that many people, including teenagers, did to experience pleasure. But I wasn't aware of how, or why, it worked with another male. I hadn't even considered that before, since it didn't fit with the purpose of the action. The White Room had only educated me so far, it seemed.

The embarrassing arguments continued, and soon enough an announcement that the meeting was over played over the

loudspeakers. I got up quickly and made to leave the room. Only Kikyou noticed as I moved, everyone else tied up in discussion, or in Shiina's case a book, and so I got out of the room without anyone noticing.

I grabbed my phone and opened up the location tracking feature. I had made Karuizawa enable it for specific people, in case something like this came up, and the school was thoughtful enough to transpose it onto the cruise ship. It would have been useless if it only covered the school grounds.

There. She was in a service corridor on the other side of the ship, two levels up, and wasn't moving. She was alone on the map, so perhaps she was hiding. I had almost every student in my contacts now, thanks to my work with Kikyou, so anyone who had their location on would show up, but I suspected the Class C girls would turn it off if they were doing any rule breaking. No, it was very possible they were there with her.

I took off through a side door. My explorations of these pathways earlier on the trip had been worth it. I had to dodge a few workers to ensure I didn't get kicked out, but even with those incidents it was still much faster to travel this way. Direct options were available, and I didn't have to bother with useless questions from people who wanted to talk to me.

I quickly made my way through and up towards the spot she was at. I slowed down as I neared, masking my steps to be silent, ensuring no one heard me as I approached. I couldn't see anyone yet, but muffled voices were starting to make their way down the corridor.

"Hey. why'd you bring me to a place like this?!"

"Stop playing dumb! You did push Rika, didn't you? Start talking."

"H-huh? I already told you, you've got the wrong person!"

I looked around the corner ever so slightly, and took in the scene before me. The three girls surrounded Karuizawa, forcing her back against the wall. They were preventing her from escaping. However, even surrounded, Karuizawa offered no apologies. She continued to deny what they were saying. Maybe she really was innocent.

"Look, I have plans later. Can you please move?" asked Karuizawa.

"Okay, let's confirm it right now. I'm going to call Rika. If it wasn't you, we'll forgive you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'll call the teacher."

"And what will you tell the teacher, exactly? It's not like we're being violent with you or anything. Besides, if you talk to the teacher, we'll tell on you, too. We'll say you pushed Rika. You'll also

get in trouble."

Neither side intended to back down. Karuizawa tried to escape, but the girls grabbed her arm and pushed her up against the wall. One of the girls took out her phone, probably to call Rika.

"W-wait!" Karuizawa pleaded with them to not call.

"What? Why should we wait?"

"I just remembered something. I bumped into that girl before."

"You're a total liar. You remembered her from the very beginning, didn't you? Well, whatever. So, are you going to apologize to Rika properly?"

"No way. She was in the wrong. She's a complete airhead."

I would've thought Karuizawa would take responsibility for her actions, but instead, she refused. She refused despite knowing it would upset them. She was quite resilient it seemed, or had a very important reason to remain strong.

"You're seriously pissing us off. We might've forgiven you if you'd actually apologized to Rika. But now, we definitely won't forgive you."

The girl pressed down against Karuizawa's shoulder.

"Whatever. You probably never planned on forgiving me."

After Karuizawa spat out those words, one of the girls, Yamashita, lost her patience. "Shiho-chan. I've had enough. Karuizawa's unforgivable."

"I know, right? She should understand exactly how Rika felt. Why don't we bully her for real?"

She struck Karuizawa's shoulder with a little extra force. Things were progressing rather quickly. Right now, Karuizawa must be terrified, but she was holding herself together rather well. Perhaps she was resilient, perhaps she was relying on me to come. But eventually she would break down. This could go on for a while longer, and I was content to watch. I had my phone out and was already recording the incident from around the corner. Whatever the outcome, I would have leverage over the three girls in Class C.

More importantly, Karuizawa Kei looked like she was starting to change.

"Ahh...ahh..." She panted as if she were having a hard time breathing. She held her head in her hands as if she were in pain. When Manabe and the others saw her suffering, they weren't sympathetic. The opposite, actually. It irritated them.

I hadn't expected this. Karuizawa was reacting much more extremely than I had expected. She had been terrified about the bullying, that much was clear from our conversation the other day, but I didn't realise it was to this extent. Something was missing from the equation, something that caused this unordinary amount

of fear.

"Act as girly as you want, we're still not going to forgive you."

They grabbed Karuizawa's hair and forcefully yanked her head up.

"I've always hated your face, Karuizawa. I mean, don't you girls think she's just butt-ugly?"

"Yeah, for sure. Don't you just want to cut her face?"

"St-stop. Stop it."

"'St-stop it', she says. What happened to your big attitude?"

The more you envied your enemy, the more you hated them, to the point where you wanted to strip away their advantages. If we were talking looks, then Karuizawa had them all beat. But Manabe, Yamashita, and Yabu wouldn't be satisfied until they'd verbally torn Karuizawa's pretty face apart. Karuizawa trembled, frightened. She was on the verge of tears, still unable to move.

People show their true colors when they're in jeopardy. A little more pressure, and I'd know who Karuizawa Kei really was. The only risk was how far the girls would go. They weren't going to stop with verbal insults that much was clear. This situation was destined to become physical, and now I had to decide how far I let it go.

"This is where you belong, isn't it? On your knees. You're good at that right? Being on your knees?" Manabe mocked Karuizawa.

"N-no, I won't! I've never done that kind of thing before!" Karuizawa shouted.

With an effort I hadn't expected her to still poses, she tried to slip past Manabe, but Manabe snatched her long hair and pulled her back, slamming her into the wall.

They should have agonised over whether to use violence. But in the heat of the moment, when they finally had the girl they despised in front of them, they didn't hold back.

From what they had said, this was about protecting their weaker friend. At least that was what they claimed. But in actuality, they probably didn't care at all about Riku. If they did, they would have been with her now, instead of relentlessly hunting Karuizawa. No, this was about them getting a chance to assert their dominance. They wanted to hurt Karuizawa, and now they had an excuse to do so. They could let out all their dark desires, while pretending to hold the moral high ground.

It was disgusting behaviour. If you're going to be a bad person, at least recognise it.

"Ow, ow! It hurts! Let me go!" screamed Karuizawa.

Karuizawa wept at having her hair pulled, and pleaded, but Manabe only laughed like she was enjoying it. They were in a service corridor, in a part of the ship that was rarely busy, meaning

it was highly unlikely they'd be interrupted. Seeing Karuizawa suffer, especially after her proud behavior, probably felt great to them. There was no way they would stop now.

"Agh!" Karuizawa shouted.

"Whoa, Shiho. Don't you think you're hitting her a little too much? Wow, you're harsh."

Manabe continued to drive her knee into Karuizawa's stomach. Of course, Manabe wasn't used to hitting someone like that, so her movements were sluggish. It shouldn't have hurt much. But Karuizawa's pain was Manabe's greatest reward.

"Whap! The sound echoed through the room. Karuizawa looked like she was in pain after that hit.

"S-s-s-stop it!" pleaded Karuizawa.

"Ha ha. This is fun! Ha ha!"

"How does it feel, you fucking whore. This is where you belong!"

"Please, forgive me!" Karuizawa pleaded.

Seeing her like that must have felt euphoric for Manabe and the others"

Karuizawa collapsed in fear, tears streaming down her face. She hadn't even fought back, not really. No, the instant that Karuizawa had been forced into the corner she had broken, fallen apart without much effort. Something in her mind had snapped, and her eyes weren't focused on the situation. They were looking past everything, to some other instance that she remembered.

So that was it. Karuizawa was bullied in her past. She had probably been mercilessly, relentlessly bullied constantly without break previously, and had run to this school to avoid it. She wasn't reacting to the bullying right now. It probably didn't even come close to what she had suffered before, if this was her reaction. She was suffering from PTSD, and it had been triggered the moment Manabe and her friends had dragged her in here.

That was enough, though. Karuizawa didn't have much consciousness left, and I needed her awake for this. I couldn't rescue a damsel in distress, not really, if they weren't awake to fall for their hero.

I put my phone down after I stopped recording, and walked around the corner.

"What's going on here?"

Manabe, Kinoshita and Yabu all froze. They stopped hitting Karuizawa, although Manabe's grip on her hair never loosened, and turned their heads to me.

"What? Nothing, right? We were just talking to Karuizawa-san when she collapsed. Yeah?"

I looked down at the girl they were talking about. Her cheeks

were red from being repeadedly struck, and it was all she could do to look up at me, snot and tears dripping down her face.

"Ayano... kouji-kun?"

I walked over to Karuizawa, and made an attempt to check how she was. There was nothing immediately concerning from what I could tell, no broken bones or cracked ribs from kicks, but anything was possible.

As I was doing this though, the three girls had turned and attempted to leave.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Huh? What are you talking about, we can do what we want." They were still denying their actions.

"You assaulted Karuizawa. Do you think you'll get away with this?"

Manabe scoffed, a confident look on her face, obviously one she believed was justified when backed with two of her friends, both of whom were relatively fit.

"Oh yeah? And where's your proof? Karuizawa had a little fall, that's all that happened."

"Is that so?"

They were obviously going to deny it to the end. There was nothing else to do but finish the confrontation. I pulled out my phone and held it out, after skipping late into the video. It wouldn't do for Karuizawa to know just how long I waited and let her suffer.

"This is enough evidence to get you kicked out of school. Do you honestly thinkg I'm just going to let you walk away?"

"Grr... fuck you, you bastard!"

Manabe made a leap for my phone, followed closely by Yabu and Yamashita. Two of them went for my arms and legs, while Manabe went straight for the device that could doom them.

I sighed. This really was troublesome. The best solution would be to put the fear of god into them, but I guess I would have to suffice with the fear of me.

Yamashita went for my legs, trying her best to tackle me to the ground. She was an athletic person, and clearly recognised that even in a three on one they would struggle to beat me, but if I fell over, or even just lost balance, the fight would shift. I responded by kicking her in the face, sending her flying across the service corridor, blood dripping from her nose, a dazed expression on her face.

"Damn you!"

"Surely Ibuki warned you about me?"

Yabu had gone for my left arm, the one not holding my phone, but upon seeing her friend being kicked, she changed targets and

went straight for my head, specifically the eyes. It was a bold move, and a good one. There was no surefire way to protect your eyes in a fight, but it was an aggressive move, leaving you open from the sides.

My fist swung around and hit her in the temple, knocking her backwards, until she slid down the wall next to Yamashita, holding her head in her hands.

Manabe was desperately clawing at my grip on my phone to no avail, but she gave me a couple of scratches. I tossed my phone up into the air, and when she tilted her head up to watch it, I shot my hand out and grabbed her throat, catching my phone with my other hand.

I held her there, allowing her feet to touch the ground as to not put much pressure on her neck from holding her that it would leave a mark, and as I did so I looked into her eyes, showing her the true darkness inside of mine.

"This plan of yours was stupid. Stay away from Karuizawa, or I'll have to use this evidence. At best, you'll get expelled. But if you tell no one about what happened here, I won't bother you again. Understand?"

"Gkk!"

I took Manabe's choking noise as a yes and let her go, pushing her back to her friends, who had lifted themselves up from the wall.

"Leave."

Fearful eyes tracked me as they walked out of the service corridor, and back into the main hallway. They didn't seem to be injured badly, Yamashita's nosebleed already clearing up, but it would be a while before they were capable of looking at me without flinching.

It was likely they would follow the rules I gave them. The teachers wouldn't have any proof that it happened, and even if they found some, I had evidence that this was in self-defence. No, the real danger came if Ryuuen found out, but I was confident they were more scared of me than they were of him.

Nodding to myself, I turned around and crouched in front of Karuizawa, who had lifted herself up from the ground and was sitting against the wall.

"Sorry I was late. I couldn't get out of my group meeting."

"You... you didn't have to do all that," she whispered, still focusing on where the three girls had been injured just before.

I tilted my head slightly. I understood where she came from, but this was the service I was offering her, and it would be helpful if she understood that.

"I told you I'd help you. If you don't want me to get violent, that's

fine, but understand that I can protect you, better than anyone else."

"W-why would I need protection? You've already delt with them."

Very quickly, Karuizawa was reasserting herself, faster than I had planned for. I needed to shatter that quickly.

"Because you were bullied before, weren't you? Before you came to this school."

She began to shake again, pulling herself in to a ball as I said that.

"No... no you're wrong."

I moved my hand to her shoulder. She flinched as I did so, but I didn't move it, just left it there as a firm reminder of my presence.

"Karuizawa, it's ok. Your secret is safe with me."

"D-Did you hear this from... Hirata-kun?"

"No, I figured it out myself. You got his help to secure your position, you pretended to be his girlfriend. But it wasn't enough. Hirata wasn't enough. In the end, you still got bullied."

Karuizawa was much smarter than most people thought. She played if off with the ditzy gyaru act, but she had thought through well the situation she had been in before, and how to best prevent it happening again.

"Your only mistake was choosing to side with a man too weak to help you."

"Why are you... why are you saying this!"

I held out my hand, and she tentatively took it, using me to support her as she stood up from the ground. We stood there, eye to eye, and I could see a spark of life left in the dull violet of her eyes.

"I want to help you Karuizawa. I want you to be my friend."

"Why... why the hell would you want that. Don't you know who I am. I... I'm..."

"An innocent girl who's suffered more than she should ever have to."

She didn't speak, didn't move for a while after I spoke, slowly processing the words I said. I didn't do anything, but stand there and let her thing, let her understand my offer.

"No... why should I trust you... you're just like the rest of them, and now you know... you know... get away from me! You're lying! Why would you want to help me?!"

She pushed me back and I let her do so, until I was leaning against the wall on the other side of the corridor. There was only about two meter separating us, but it was more than before, and it seemed to give the panting, panicking Karuizawa a measure of calm.

"You're right. I do want something in return."

"What, are you after my body?!" That was the first thing her mind jumped to? Although it was possible that to her, it was all she had left. For bullying to cause PTSD of that level, it would have had to be terrible. There probably wasn't much she hadn't experienced.

"Of course not. I'm not a monster. I just want a simple favour."

"Oh-h." She lost a little of her wind, before slumping back against the wall. There was still a hint of fear in her eyes, but confusion had taken over most of her actions.

"Karuizawa, I want to be your friend. I promise I'll protect you for the next three years. Whatever happens, I'll make sure to back you up."

"Why would you do that? Why for me?"

Why indeed? Eh, I might as well go with the trend. It wasn't exactly wrong either.

"I want you to keep an eye on Kikyou for me," I admitted.

"Eh?" She seemed baffled by reason, enough to pull her out of her previous fear completely. It was such a strange, benign request that it dissolved all of her previous worries in a moment.

"I'm... worried about her. She's been under a lot of stress in Dragon group, and I know she won't admit it to me. I just want you to listen in class, for any rumours. If she ever says anything or confesses to anyone that she's having a hard time, please let me know."

It was so unbelievably stupid of a reason, even though it was mostly accurate. This was the role I had decided Karuizawa would play. Kikyou was my master of whispers, the one who controlled the class for me, who knew everything. But who watched the watchmen?

Karuizawa took on an amused, if still dubious look at my words. She wiped away some of the tears and snot from her face, having long since stopped crying, to question my request.

"Seriously? You... I honestly don't buy it. You'd protect me throughout school... just to keep an eye on your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Not yet at least. Jeez, I swear you two are together all the time. That's all you really want?"

I nodded. "Yes, that's it. I actually just wanted to help you, but you didn't seem to believe me. Even so, could you please keep an eye on her. I am worried."

She took a moment, considering the situation, before ultimately agreeing to the deal. It was incredibly biased in her favour, but that simply made it more appealing.

"I suppose so. I mean, Hirata did get you to take over for him, and I trust him that much. You... you really, really mean it? You'll

protect me? I'll never forgive you if you're lying."

"I mean it. I've dealt with those three girls, and if anyone ever tries anything again, I'll save you again. Although, I can't actually elevate your social standing. I'm not as good as Hirata in that way."

She still looked hesitant, but I could tell that I had her. There was no one else offering to help her. Problems had been continually building up, and I was the only person who seemed to care.

"I... ok fine. I'll keep an eye on your little girlfriend. Just... please. Don't... please protect me." She fell short a little at the end, realising this was the extent of her life. Karuizawa needed others to survive. She couldn't live without them, and had to attach herself to someone, like a parasite to live. First it was Hirata, and now me. I made it clear what I needed from her, and it wasn't much.

"Like I said, she's not my girlfriend."

"Yeah, sure. Listen, no one beats up three people just so someone can keep an eye on a friend." When she put it like that, it did sound suspicious.

I sighed. "I'll protect you, Karuizawa. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"I... ok. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun." She smiled at me, a beaming genuine one, the third real smile she'd ever given me, or any boy other than Hirata for that matter. Yes, Karuizawa would stand at my side from now on.

I helped her out of the service corridor, and once I was sure she wasn't too badly hurt, at least nothing a day of rest wouldn't cure, I let her on her way.

Now, I had the second most powerful person in the class by my side. With Karuizawa keeping an eye on Kikyou under the guise of my concern for her wellbeing, there was nothing left to worry about. Every plot and scheme would come by me, and I could finally manipulate the upcoming battle however I saw fit.

But most importantly, I had someone who could watch Kikyou's every move. I made it clear that I just wanted to know if she admitted her worries to anyone else. It wouldn't do for Karuizawa to start stalking her everywhere, just to keep an ear to the ground for anything suspicious.

Now I had someone who would know if Kikyou turned on me. I had only one connection to the social movements of the class, and that was the devil herself. If she betrayed me, even though it was a miniscule possibility now, I would find out from Karuizawa. She was the watcher in the class, the person to watch the watcher.

Now that I had someone who could see her every move, there was nothing to be afraid of. Now, I could finally allow myself to trust Kikyou, to properly grow closer to her. Now that there was no

way for her to hide, that I knew every one of her actions, I no longer had to worry.

That's how trust works, right?

Authors Notes:

So, here's Karuizawa scene. Quite a kind change to how he dealt with Kushida, and the canon story of how he dealt with Karuizawa, but it was a lot of fun to do it this way. Kindness begets kindness and trust, and I think in this situation Karuizawa would respond best this way. Ayanokouji already has Kushida, so he doesn't need a number 1, he just needs her to trust him enough to watch Kushida. There's no need to break her down completely.

I want to be clear that I do not share views that I may have expressed in this chapter on relationships. I don't give a shit about whether you're gay or whatever, i don't want to know or care. That being said, I'm confident Ayanokouji would never have been taught that stuff in the white room. Sure, he would have gone through sexual education at some point, but his (probably heavily conservative) Japanese father wouldn't find that to be something worth explaining, let alone believe it. Of course, though, he was well aware of what was going on with Chihiro and Ichinose. How, you ask? I'm sure he read it in a book. That explains everything. Attraction can be understandable, and he's almost certainly read a book where a same-sex relationship was mentioned as a joke, which is what he did last chapter, but to the extent of understanding and conceptualizing it properly is something I don't believe he would he would have for anything other than male/female relationships.

It doesn't quite fit in, yeah i know, it takes a bit of forcing, but it made for a fun chapter to write so just ignore any inconsistencies for the moment.

Y'all really hate Karuizawa, but don't worry she won't be getting too much screen time in this fic. She's more of a main character than most, and she has a part to play, but she's not going to take the role of best girl. That belongs to my queen. I went back to stealing a bit from the light novel, and changed up the original scene where Yukimura bursts in. Bit disappointing that I had to copy and paste again, but it turned out pretty well i think.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 11 - Preparing the Contestants

Once again, Dragon group had convened, on the night of the third day. Everyone in the room was growing bored, as the number of meetings went on and on, and the stalemate continued. Even Kanzaki seemed to have given up making meaningful progress. It was an interesting reversal from our very first meeting.

Thanks to my deal with Ryuuen, Shiina, Ichinose and Amikura, there was no real effort to find the VIP any longer. In fact, it was only Class A that was making an effort still, the complete opposite of how we originally started. Every now and then one of them would come up with a new question for me, and I would brush it aside without any interest. Even Kanzaki was slowly running out of questions, beginning to accept the inevitable result that was drawing closer and closer.

"Do you really intend to secure Outcome One, Ayanokouji?"

"Of course. One more Outcome 3 or 4 wouldn't affect the ultimate results too much, and I'd really like those private points."

The private points didn't actually interest me. I still had a rather large collection of them, but more could never hurt. It also provided a reason for the group to use to try and understand me, and later predict my actions. Throwing them off now could become useful in the future.

Kanzaki sighed at my words. "I suppose there isn't much we can do. No one's going to prove it at this stage, and I doubt any of us are actually trustworthy right now." He looked around the room, accentuating a fact that everyone should have accepted by now. Pretending that we could work in a group was a moot point. Since there was one untrustworthy person, Ryuuen, everyone else had to be willing to stoop to his level. Which meant that not a single person in the room could be relied upon to act in the best interests of the group.

"You really are confident that no one will submit your name, Ayanokouji-kun. Perhaps I should do that now?" Matoba made another useless bluff. Ryuuen had done the same thing on the first day, and it hadn't worked then. The possibility of someone caving to it now was even lower.

"Go ahead. I wouldn't mind getting out of this group early. Besides, how do you even know that the VIP is in Class D?"

"Don't be stupid Ayanokouji. The school equally divided them between classes, and every other class had three named."

Ryuuen perked up at this, hearing a potential argument to get involved in.

"When the fuck did the school say that, baldy? There's no proof that every class gets three."

Katsuragi sat up straighter as a proper challenger appeared to debate. "I find it unlikely to believe that they would give one class such a handicap, whether you see it as an advantage or not. Besides, every other group is accounted for, meaning that the VIP in Dragon group must be from Class D."

"Hmm, but perhaps Ayanokouji-kun colluded with someone from another class," Ichinose considered, posing a wrinkle in Katsuragi's theory.

"But Honami-chan, no one would be crazy enough to team up with Ayanokouji-kun now, not after him beating us all on the island! They'd have to be trying to lose!"

I groaned slightly. Amikura needed to learn when to keep her mouth shut. It was a reasonable argument that seemed to have effectively allayed Katsuragi's concerns, but she was having a terrible time at holding her composure together and not laughing.

For that matter, so was Ryuuen, although from the flicker of his eye to me I could tell he was intentionally doing it to try and piss me off.

"I suppose. But again, it can't be ruled out." His gaze shifted to the entirety of Class B. "None of you have allied with Ayanokouji, have you?"

"Of course not," Kanzaki snorted, shaking his head. His three classmates followed suit, successfully denying any collusion between our classes under the perceptive stare of Katsuragi as he tried to pick out a liar.

He shifted his attention to Ryuuen and Class C, the former of which simply began to laugh. "Are you serious? As if I'd team up with him. You clown, the only thing I want is to beat that fucking monster."

A masterful performance, although he hadn't really lied. Ryuuen wasn't so much as working with me but not interfering with my plans.

"Ne, Katsuragi-kun. How do we know the VIP isn't in Class A all along?"

"As if I would bother with the words of someone in Class D right now, Kushida-san. Rest assured, if your delusion that the VIP is in

Class A is correct, I'll share the name so we can all secure Outcome One together."

"Yeah, Class B will as well! We're all in this together, right?" Amikura threw her support behind the promise, even though she knew the VIP wasn't with them.

The rest of the group quickly came to a consensus about this, all agreeing that after the exam time was over, we would secure Outcome One. Of course, ever word spoken was lies. By letting outcome one occur, the were letting me win. It was a distasteful flavour in that event, so I was confident that someone would try and betray before time ran out.

I lost interest in the flow of conversation once again, instead choosing to ponder the various possibilities that could happen in the future. Kikyou was mine, and I could also use Karuizawa– to a point- if it became necessary. However, I suspected there was one thing still missing in Class D, for the necessary changes to come into effect. If I was lucky, I would be able to resolve this before the cruise ended. One of the conversations at least, was inevitable, and the other I could manage to create myself.

I was dragged back from my thoughts when another question was directed towards me.

"Are you religious, Ayanokouji-kun?"

It was Ichinose who asked the strange question out of the blue. She was sitting rather close to me tonight, so not many people overheard it, continuing their own discussions.

"What prompted that?"

"Hmm, you made a joke this morning about cleansing your soul. It made me curious, although I apologise if it's too personal."

I thought about it, before deciding it couldn't hurt to answer her. Admitting your religious denomination was a rather personal thing, that was true, but it also wasn't one that people should be ashamed of. I didn't understand why there should be a reason to hide what you believed, as long as it wasn't forced upon others.

"I wouldn't consider myself to be particularly religious, nor believe in any kind of fate." I shrugged. "I've always seen it as a way to avoid responsibility, to avoid the responsibility of making decisions yourself and facing the consequences."

Ichinose held a fingertip to her lips, pondering my words for a while. It was a rather cynical view I had, but it was impossible to believe there was some all-knowing being who had a plan for everyone while growing up in the White Room. If that was the case, then I simply couldn't comprehend the purpose of the children who were born only to die a few years after. Perhaps they had a purpose in the grand scheme of which ever god you believed in of the three

big monotheistic religions, but it was difficult to believe in or follow a god after that.

"I suppose that must be something you need to believe. It would be hard to act knowing that you would be judged. I think you would struggle to find any student in a position of power in this school who still considered themselves too truly be religious."

Ichinose made a valid point. I didn't expect to find anyone in the school who held Judaist or Islamic beliefs, but Christianity was more common in Japan. For students who followed that, many of the decisions this school would force them to make in order to reach Class A would run counter-intuitive to the nature of their faith.

"I wouldn't be surprised to find Buddhist students though. I've always considered Buddhism to be more of a lifestyle than a religion, but even that would run counter productive to our desires to reach Class A." She giggled at her words. "Our school really doesn't align with any religion, does it? I wonder what that says about us?"

She was so close to understanding the crux of the issue, to understanding what made Ichinose a weak person, yet she couldn't make the final connection. Perhaps because she considered it a strength, or perhaps she simply refused to accept that as a flaw.

"There's one fundamental difference between this school and it's environment, and most world religions. Do you know what that is?" She didn't so I explained it as bluntly as possible. "This school doesn't have morals, or ethics. Every religion has those, to an extent, but our school completely lacks them. For that reason, religion and our competition cannot coexist."

She seemed a little shocked at my words, at my insistence that religion had no place in this school.

"Does that have to be the case? I don't see why morals can't exist in this school; in fact, I'd argue that they're already present."

"Then you're delusional. This school was designed by the government, to create the future leaders of Japan, right?" At her confirmation I continued, "and so it would make sense that we were being taught how to function in the society we will enter. One within which morals and ethics are a weakness."

Ichinose was taken aback at my words, since I had basically insulted the foundation of Class B. "Morals aren't a weakness, Ayanokouji-kun. They help us to be good people, and that's how a good society will prosper."

"You're wrong. Morals make you weak. It was ethics, the belief that helping someone in need, that almost doomed your class in the Island Exam." She flinched at the reminder of their naïve action to

take in Kaneda. "Ethics and Morals have no place here. They will only be a detriment to your chances of victory."

She smiled sadly at me, tilting her head in pity for my beliefs. "That's a rather sad way to live, Ayanokouji-kun. If not for morals, how will you ever be able to trust someone?"

"I'd rather stand alone in victory, than be crushed because I placed someone else before me. Ichinose, you're going up against Ryuuen and Sakayanagi, neither of which follow a moral code. Until you realise that, until you play by their rules, you don't have a hope of winning."

"I guess I'll just have to make it my mission to prove you wrong, then. I still believe that people are good, even though you seem to be falling further and further from that definition the more I get to know you, Ayanokouji-kun. But I'll show you that I'm right, and you don't have to fight alone."

"You're welcome to try, Ichinose." I knew, though, that it was a hopeless dream. Ichinose, and her class, while they held onto their pathetic morals and ethics, in a desperate grab for the moral high ground, they would lose in every way that mattered. The world didn't care if you were righteous. History was written by the victors, not the noble heros who fell for a lost cause. Hopefully this girl before me would come to realise that sooner rather than later, before her class suffered too much.

I tilted my head at her, realising I never asked the question myself. "You didn't mention whether you were religious or not, Ichinose."

She smiled again, this one more guarded than the last. I had revealed far too many of my morals, or lack-thereof, and perhaps I had finally crossed the line in her mind of a good person to a proper enemy. Only the noble girl in front of me could tell.

"I'd rather not answer that, Ayanokouji-kun. It's rather personal."

So, she was a coward after all.

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Once the meeting was over, I made my way to Horikita as we left the room.

"Can we talk? It's important."

Naturally she gave me a suspicious look. I wasn't someone who interacted with her often, despite being in the same group as her. Despite this, she agreed to follow me, and we made our way onto the deck of the boat.

Horikita had been making moves, albeit small ones at that. Ever since we returned to the cruise ship, I had seen her around occasionally with Sudou, and while I had no idea what she was planning, or the current state of the relationship between them, it

was progress. I had also been informed that she had made overtures to a few of the quieter students in the class, those with not many friends and less influence.

It wasn't much, but she was beginning to build up a base in the class, and hopefully they would follow her, at least enough to save me the effort.

All she needed now was an opponent, and I wasn't going to sit around and let myself become her target.

"So. What did you want to talk about."

"I'm worried about Hirata."

She snorted, apparently not interested in the man fallen from grace. "And why should I care? His problems are his own. I hope you didn't call me out here just to ask for me to help him feel better."

I shook my head. "I'm worried for you about Hirata. He's becoming more erratic, and I can barely understand the nonsense he's spouting anymore. I can't keep him under control any longer."

Horikita turned away from me and looked over the railing of the ship, trying to think through the situation.

"I hate to admit it, but I have to agree with you. He's still trying to chase me around the ship, and I've been able to avoid him most of the time, but he won't shut up, some nonsense about betrayal and violating someone."

"You see why I'm concerned?"

She sighed, before turning back to face me. It was an impressive sight, to see Horikita filled with determination, this time actually backed by standing and belief in her actions. No longer was she alone in the class, not completely, and there was a resolve in her I hadn't seen before.

Previously, Horikita had been stubborn in her beliefs and goals, but now it was focused, in a sense that was more real than before.

"I can deal with this myself, but thank you for the warning."

"Hm? Oh, I won't be helping, either of you. Whatever Hirata is planning, whatever delusions he's under, I'm staying far away from it."

"So you're a coward?"

"Not at all, it's just more fun to watch from the sidelines."

"Ayanokouji what is going on? You know something."

Horikita was almost begging me for information, although she would never go quite that far. She was, however, very curious to understand the situation, since she was clever enough to recognise there was danger, and she didn't know how much.

"Hirata has it out for you, that much I can tell. Why, I've got no idea, but don't take him lightly. Yes, he lost a lot of standing after

trying to hit Ike on the island, but there's still plenty of people in the class who would believe him, especially if he pulls his act together."

"He really has that big of a problem with me?" Horikita was shocked that Hirata would turn on her that much. "Surely he knows that fighting a classmate is a terrible idea."

"I honestly don't think he cares. If you want answers, I suggest you ask Karuizawa. She was the closest person to him, I'm sure she knows something."

"Karuizawa-san, huh? I suppose that makes sense, but I still don't... hey, AYanokouji-kun! Where are you going?" She finally looked up from her pondering over my words, to notice that I was making my way away from her to head back to my cabin.

"I've given you my warning, Horikita. Be careful."

"Why! It's not like you to help me out, so why tell me any of this?"

I turned to face her, reading the confusion, desperation, determination all washing through her mind. She had no idea what to think, or any clue as to why I did what I did. That uncertainty was something that Horikita detested.

"Because if it comes to it, I'd much rather lose Hirata than you. Don't lose, Horikita, because there won't be anyone stepping in to rescue you."

She straightened up, steel in her eyes as she made her next statement. "I don't know if what you've said is true, if there really is the possibility of a civil war in our class. But if there is, I won't lose."

I appraised her, deciding that she truly meant it. Horikita had changed a lot in just a few months. Instead of fighting to impress her brother, for the first time she was fighting for herself. And it was that, that gave her more determination, more focus than ever before.

"Good luck, Horikita. I'm looking forward to seeing what you do."

Finally, I walked away from her, leaving Horikita to ponder over the situation alone on the deck. She wouldn't believe me, not really, until Hirata made a move. Until then though, I expected her to prepare, at least somewhat, so that she wasn't caught unaware when he did.

I was looking forward to seeing what she did.

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It was around two in the morning when my roommate quietly woke up. Taking extreme consideration as to not wake the other three people in the room, Hirata slipped out of bed. Since students were required to sleep in their jerseys, he stole out of the room

while still wearing it.

After I'd confirmed he wasn't going to the men's room, I grabbed my keycard and got out of bed myself. There was no guarantee he'd make a move today, but it seemed like my labours had begun to bear fruit.

Hirata made his way into the hallway, and turned left, moving as quickly as possible without making too much noise. His head spun on a swivel, constantly making sure there was no one around, but I stayed out of sight the entire time.

He continued on for a while, constantly checking and dashing, desperate for no one to see him. I followed behind in an unhurried fashion. I didn't see what was so bad about being caught. It wasn't against the rules to be out at night.

But I was fairly certain I knew what Hirata was up to.

The place where Hirata was heading

The meeting place was in front of the vending machine near the second-level lounge area. Being in the centre of the hallway, it was easy for people to see us, but its placement also meant that we could see them. Its location made eavesdropping difficult, but not too much that I couldn't hide for too long.

"Why did you call me here, Hirata-kun?"

It was Karuizawa. This was an inevitable conversation I had known would happen; my only issue was getting myself involved. It would have probably gone roughly the same way if I hadn't been here, but now I could direct it to my advantage.

"Are you ok? Those girls haven't done anything have they?"

"Eh? No, I mean, it's already sorted out, you don't need to worry about it anymore."

"Oh, you apologised to them, thank god its ok."

Hirata seemed especially relieved that the situation was handled. He despised conflict between people in our year and didn't think for a second that it would be handled a different way.

"Ah, well, it was actually Ayanokouji-kun who helped me."

"Wha..."

"Thank you, Hirata. For protecting me for so long. But I understand that it might be too much, and I don't want to hold you back any more. Ayanokouji-kun said he'll protect me now, so you don't have to."

Hirata couldn't respond to Karuizawa's kind words. He had spent the last few months looking out for her. I didn't know the true depth of what was going on, and why Karuizawa had sought him out, but he had made sacrifices in his life to help her. She was giving him an out here, worried about his mental state.

After a few seconds of shock, Hirata found his voice again, eyes

burning with concern, fear and surprisingly, rage.

"No, Karuizawa-san, you need to stay away from Ayanokouji-kun."

"Huh? What are you talking about Hirata-kun? He protected me." She started to back away, concerned by the look in his eyes, but Hirata advanced towards her, backing her into the corner. "H-Hirata-kun, stop it, you're scaring me."

He grabbed her shoulders once she had nowhere to go. "Karuizawa-san, Ayanokouji-kun is dangerous. He won't protect you, you need to stay away from him. Please, for your own safety."

I decided to intervene, before Hirata provided a simple but problematic explanation for his concerns. I walked out of my hiding spot until I was directly behind Hirata. Karuizawa noticed me before I could speak however, and took a sharp breath, eyes shining suddenly.

"That's enough Hirata. Let her go."

He froze his actions upon hearing my voice, before releasing Karuizawa and turning around to face me, doing his best to put himself between Karuizawa and I

"What are you doing here, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I was curious as to why you would get up at two in the morning. I hadn't expected you to be assaulting Karuizawa."

"I wasn't-

"Backing her into a corner, holding her there despite her asking you to stop? I'm sure you can understand just how suspicious that is." I stepped closer to him, extruding as strong an aura as I could. Hirata needed to learn he couldn't rely on Karuizawa being on his side for the future.

"Ayanokouji-kun, it's fine, you don't need to worry."

I stepped back a bit as Karuizawa made an effort to calm me down. She clearly wasn't too bothered by what Hirata had done, although I could see her hands were shaking slightly. She moved from where he was, to come and stand beside me, a clear display of her new aliegence.

It was this action that finally shattered Hirata.

"No... but, Ayanokouji's the bad guy."

"What did I do Hirata? Why don't you trust me?"

"No, see Karuizawa-san, he told me himself. On the island, he was the one who stole your underwear!" In a panic Hirata began to level accusations against me in order to make Karuizawa turn away from me.

"Eh?"

"He said it himself! He's working with Horikita to get me out of the class. Ayanokouji was the one who's been trying to bully you.

You have to believe me!"

"Hirata... what on earth are you talking about."

These baseless accusations he was throwing at me, coupled with the slightly deranged look in his eye. There was much more to this interaction than I cared to understand, but I could tell that Hirata was very emotionally invested in helping Karuizawa, and keeping her safe. It wasn't for any kind of love as far as I could tell, but I didn't need to know why.

I just needed him to keep going.

"Hirata-kun, please don't say things like that about Ayanokouji-kun. He's only been good to me."

Karuizawa was hiding behind me slightly now, doing her best to keep away from Hirata. To her, now, he was an unknown quantity, someone she had once trusted, but now couldn't understand. I, on the other hand, was the person who had only good intentions, who genuinely wanted to help her, and asked for nothing more than to keep an eye on a girl I 'liked'.

Hirata sighed, realising that he had maybe gone too far. But there was still some fire left in his eyes, and I knew this conversation still had some time to go.

"Karuizawa-san... I know I haven't kept my promise. But I can. You don't need to turn to Ayanokouji to do so. If you just talk it out with the girls in Class C-

"No, Hirata-kun, that won't work. Ayanokouji-kun helped me. He saved me, and you want me to leave him? Just... give me a reason, give me proof that he's dangerous. I don't want to think of you as someone who lies."

Karuizawa offered Hirata an olive branch. Clearly she didn't want to abandon him just yet, or at least wanted to calm him down right now. It was a kind offering from her, to still accept someone who had just before been intimidating her, but it wouldn't work out in her favour, nor Hirata's for that matter.

This situation was mine.

"Look. Ayanokouji said it himself, he stole your underwear on the island. He's working for Horikita, she wants to push me out. Maybe, I'm not sure." He hung his head a little, eyes dazed. "I don't even know what to think anymore."

"Eh, Horikita-san? She came to talk to me earlier tonight. She was asking really weird questions about you, about if I had to pick a side whose it would be. What's going on, Hirata-kun, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Hirata's head snapped up at this, the previous fire returning to his eyes.

"Horikita approached you? About me? So it's true. She really is

trying to get rid of me."

"Hirata-kun, I'm sure that's not what's going on."

He turned and looked away from us slowly walking over to the other side of the room.

"Hirata, what are you going to do?"

"Do you actually have anything to tell me Ayanokouji?"

"Not at all. I'm much more comfortable watching from the side. It's a much safer place than in the middle of a civil war."

Hirata sighed deeply, his shoulders dropping as he recognised the situation he was in.

"I... I don't know what to do. I have to thing about this. If Horikita really wants me gone, maybe I should just drop out..."

"Are you really going to give up that easily?" I goaded him on. It wouldn't do to have a one-sided conflict after all, although Horikita wouldn't come out of it looking good in the eyes of the class.

"No... you're right. I got here, and I like it here. I love our Class, and I'll do what I can to protect it. From Horikita. She's a threat, and if she wants to get me out of the way, then I guess I'll have to fight back." He turned back to us, to Karuizawa specifically, and gave her a sad resigned smile. "I don't trust Ayanokouji, but you're probably safer with him than me right now. I wouldn't want you to be caught up in this, Karuizawa-san."

He turned to me now, and looked at me with a strength not many could muster. "And you, Ayanokouji. If you ever hurt Karuizawa, or let her down, I'll come for you too. Don't forget I still think you're working with Horikita."

"Don't worry, Hirata. I have no intention of getting involved."

With my reassurance, he bid us goodnight, albeit reluctantly, before heading off towards our cabin to go back to sleep. I turned my head to have a look at the blond-haired girl practically cowering behind me, one hand clenching on the back of my jersey for support.

"Thank you for being here, Ayanokouji-kun."

"It's no problem. Just let me know the next time someone calls you to a midnight chat."

She nodded, doing her best not to cry, although a single tear had formed in her eyes.

"I know, it's just... I thought out of everyone I could trust Hirata. But even he, he has a darker side. I didn't think he'd ever treat me like that."

"Everyone has a dark side. Even Ichinose, I'm sure. That's the only facet of a person that matters. Once you understand their dark side, their true self, then you understand them completely."

She looked up at me, hope and fear both evident on her face.

"And you, Ayanokouji-kun? What's your dark side."

I turned away from her, and began to follow the path Hirata had taken on the way back to our cabin. "You already saw my dark side, Karuizawa. I don't care what happens to people who get in my way."

"Wait!"

I stopped and turned around to see Karuizawa rooted in place.

"What?"

She was fidgeting with her hands nervously, uncomfortable with what she wanted to say. My instincst told me to wait though, and so I stood and waited for her to speak again.

"Just... thank you for helping me with Manabe and such, but... please don't do that again. I don't want you to hurt people for me."

I considered her request. She was far too kindhearted, to be willing to forgive those who tormented her, to brush it aside. I wasn't surprised she was bullied in middle school. Karuizawa didn't have the heart to retaliate. All this meant was that if I had to help her out, I would do it in a less destructive manner. Or do something she won't find out about.

"Very well. Goodnight, Karuizawa."

I finally walked away from the meeting place, leaving the blond to stand and think alone for a while. There wasn't likely to be anyone else awake right now, and so I could comfortably leave her alone.

That had been a most productive conversation. Hirata had successfully dug his own grave, turned Karuizawa away from him and to me, while agreeing to fight back against Horikita. I was worried for a moment that he would simply give up, which in turn would lead to Horikita figuring out I played them, but he found the resolve to go to war.

Class D would be shook in the coming weeks and months. Two titans of the class were destined to battle. All I had to do was make sure neither of them figured out the true situation, before one of them had come out on top.

I had originally placed Horikita as a leader of our class in order to control them. This would disrupt it, but neither Horikita nor Hirata could actively go against the class, at least not in a way that could be discovered if they wanted any loyalty. At least for now, they wouldn't let the class collapse.

It was nice having people do my work for me, in what promised to be an incredibly entertaining manner.

Authors Notes:

I've always wondered about Ayanokouji's religious beliefs, and

I'm pretty sure they've never been mentioned. I had a bit of fun exploring it in this chapter just for the sake of it. I've finished writing this arc, and to be honest it's a bigger problem than I though having it end in the middle, so I've had to do a bit of padding to make each chapter longer.

This is going to be an ongoing plot in this fic. I'm looking forward to seeing how these two compete. Between them, Horikita is definitely the more competent, but if Hirata tries he can win over loyalty much easier. He's in a tough spot right now, with the class questioning him, but I believe he can make a come back.

Karuizawa might seem a bit off, a bit too trusting right now. Don't worry, I'm addressing that in her SS, because that's suuch a big surprise that she would get one.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 12 - The End of Dragon Group

Day four. The last day of the exam. There was a tension in the air as Dragon Group convened for what could be the second last time, one that hadn't been present yesterday. The somewhat relaxed atmosphere had vanished entirely, as everyone was preparing themselves for the final confrontation.

The ball was in Class A's court.

"I'd like to start this meeting off by announcing that we in Class A have determined who the VIP for this group is." Katsuragi took the center stage with the words everyone had been waiting for.

"Eh? We already know who it is though. It's Ayanokouji-kun, he said so himself."

Nishikawa sighed. "Do you really think the VIP would admit that they were, Amikura-san?"

"Yep! I'm 100% confident that it's Ayanokouji-kun, but we get more points in Outcome One." Amikura was her usual bundle of annoyance.

"That's correct, Nishikawa-san. 500,000 points is the equivalent of 50 private points for 100 months, longer than we are at school for. Individually, there's a lot more value in securing Outcome One at this point in time."

Katsuragi stood up, instantly commanding the attention of the class with his imposing figure. "That may be true, Shiina-san, but for Class A at least, it's not an acceptable outcome. Besides, Ayanokouji isn't the VIP." He turned around and looked directly at the girl in question. "Horikita-san is."

"Huh? Have you forgotten Katsuragi, but we've already seen Horikita's email from the school? We know it isn't her, and it was definitely her phone." Kanzaki understandably didn't believe what Katsuragi was saying, since it went against the rules of the exam.

"And yet the Class D students seem to believe that Horikita is their VIP."

It seemed some of my classmates had been interrogated, and the rumour that Horikita had been hidden had made it to Class A finally. I was surprised it had taken so long, but I guess Satou and Mori were more reliable at keeping secrets than expected.

"Kukuku you aren't the only one to talk to Class D plebs, baldy. I asked them very politely after the first day, and they were very clear that Ayanokouji is the VIP."

"That's because you stopped there, Ryuuen. No, the information I came across is much more recent, and explains a lot of what is going on. Only yesterday, it was revealed that the leaders of Class D had lied to their own class. Horikita was kept hidden from almost everyone."

The black-haired girl on my left started in confusion, before a look of understanding crossed her face. She glanced at me in a rather obvious manner, but luckily no one noticed that, nor my nod of confirmation.

"Katsuragi-kun, I don't know who told you this, but I guarantee it's not true. I'm not the VIP for Dragon group, Ayanokouji-kun is."

Good. Horikita had perfectly perpetuated the lie. She had quickly realised that if we were going to frame her as the VIP, then she had to deny it. It would be far too obvious for her to admit it, and so she had acted in the appropriate manner to support my plan.

"Impressive. You don't seem to be lying at all. Credit where credit is due, Horikita-san, you're an impressive actor. I don't know how you managed it, maybe you changed the email we got from the school. Rest assured I will be reporting this, and your group will be suffering consequences for it."

He hesitated for a moment, enjoying the spotlight of everyone in the room focused on him.

"But we in Class A have found the pattern for VIP selection. And following that, Horikita is the VIP for Dragon group."

Just as planned. They bought it.

"Kukuku, really, baldy? You think you found the pattern? Alright then, if you're so confident, submit her name."

"That's really impressive Katsuragi-san. We of Class B were unable to narrow down who it was, although in the end we determined that it had to be Ayanokouji-kun or Horikita-san." Ichinose gave her own compliments to the man leading the conversation.

"I can understand lesser classes struggling with it, but you must understand that the entirety of Class A has been working on it for the past day. You never stood a chance."

I was surprised they struggled so much to determine the pattern. Most likely it was a hyperbole, as I didn't expect many of the Class A students to actually cooperate.

"In that case, I will be submitting Horikita's name, unless anyone can provide arguments otherwise."

Seeing no response, Katsuragi got his phone out and opened up the email app, before beginning to type. Having entered the correct

mail address, and the words 'Horikita Suzune' he was about to submit it when—

"Wait, Katsuragi-san."

"Hm? What is it Nishikawa-san?"

We all turned out attention to Nishikawa, who once again had something to add. She, however, was sitting rather relaxed, observing us right back, smiling with the knowledge that she had something over us.

"I was having a wonderful dinner a couple of nights ago when I heard a very interesting conversation."

I froze at her words. Nishikawa had been in the restaurant I was at with Matsushita, but I didn't think she was close enough to be able to overhear us. A stupid blunder.

It was clear that this was all rehearsed ahead of time. Nishikawa, if she really had heard my conversation, would have gone straight to Katsuragi with the news of my plan, and wouldn't have risked waiting until the last second to deliver the news. No, this was all premeditated in a last attempt to extract any information.

"And what was it about?"

"Well, Ayanokouji was outlining his plan to leak a rumour that Horikita was the VIP. I assume that's the information you came across Katsuragi-san. He made it very clear that he was the VIP but had laid false evidence that we would find."

"That's very strange, Nishikawa-san. The pattern we found was clear the Horikita was the VIP. Unless..."

The four students of Class A turned to face Ryuuen simultaneously, in a badly executed show of power. Honestly, they were milking this moment for all it was worth, and I could tell the rest of the group was growing tense, and bored. Ryuuen, to his credit, didn't even flinch.

"Kukuku you got me! Yep, I teamed up with the monster and he gave a fake name for one of my VIPs. Actually, I'm pretty sure one of your 'superior being' classmates submitted the name. Jokes on you, baldy kukuku!"

Ryuuen didn't even wait for the accusation, didn't even try to avoid it. This situation was much to entertaining for him, knowing there was a 50/50 chance that Class A would win or lose, and there wasn't much he could do to stop it besides from causing a ruckus, without taking the same risk himself.

"So, you did ally yourself with him." Katsuragi sighed at the confirmation of his fear. "Perhaps siding with your betters is all you are capable of Ryuuen. I expected more from you this exam."

"Hoh? That's a rather bold claim from someone who's gonna come last, Katsuragi-saaan," Amikura interjected. "Besides, you're really

gonna gamble on the VIP based on a conversation you overheard?"

"Amikura-san, who would you suspect less than the person who admitted to being the VIP. Honestly, it's the perfect cover and a genius plan."

"Yes, I have to agree with Nishikawa-san. You did well, Ayanokouji. I'm sure you thought 'only an idiot would out themselves as the VIP. I'ts the perfect cover', but unfortunately we saw through it. In the end, it's Class A's victory."

Now several members of the group were starting to panic, realising our plan to get Katsuragi was in shambles, simply because I'd been overheard while speaking. Horikita in particular was desperately trying to think of a way out, any plan to get Katsuragi to submit her name.

Ichinose was as well, but unlike Horikita she possessed a valuable piece of information. "Katsuragi-san, I had a conversation with Hosinomiya-sensei yesterday. She told me something very interesting."

"And what would that be?"

Ichinose stood and walked up to Katsuragi, a bold move of someone who won't back down. Unfortunately, in this situation it was the wrong way to conver the information.

"It's possible to change the sim chips in our phones. Which means it's possible that Ayanokouji and Horikita did in fact switch phones."

That was a mistake, Ichinose. In her desperate attempt to keep the plan going, she made it obvious what her intentions were. Not only was she clearly trying to mislead Katsuragi, there was no reason to believe what she said because she would have acted upon it. Unless you knew why she hadn't acted.

At this new piece of knowledge being shared with the group, Ryuuen furrowed his brow for a moment, before his eyes shot open. This was something I had been keeping from him, because out of everyone here, he was the wild card. I couldn't be sure what conclusion he would come to in the event that he knew we could switch sim cards. There was virtually no way to confirm whose phone was whose anymore.

"Holy shit you almost had me! Ah, you fucking monster I figured it out. But guess what, in the end it's your loss, and my victory KUKUKU!"

He snapped his phone out as fast as possible and began typing at a furious pace. Everyone noticed, but it seemed no one could work out what he knew, what he was planning or how to stop him. No one but—

"Sorry Ryuuen, but I can't let you win." Katsuragi hit send, before

holding out his phone to show us the email he had just sent to the school, revealing the name 'Ayanokouji Kiyotaka'. "You played a good game, Ayanokouji, and you nearly fooled us. I respect your efforts, it was impressive, but not good enough. Next time, before you challenge a class of your betters, think twice."

And with that, every phone in the room buzzed, delivering the email from the school saying that Dragon group had ended.

"God dammit Katsuragi! You fucking idiot, stop being so cocky and maybe you wouldn't have fucked up so badly!"

"Being a sore loser is unbecoming Ryuuen," Nishikawa sniffed.

"Eh, whatever. It's your funeral."

The four class A students made their way out of the room, likely off to celebrate their victory, or at least the lessening of their crushing defeat. I turned to Kikyou who was already on her phone, dealing with the countless messages asking her about the result.

"I'm sure you've got people you want to catch up with?"

She smiled at me, clearly happy that the group was over. It had been an exhausting four days of constant mental pressure, but finally she had a chance to relax.

"Yep! I'll see you around Kiyotaka-kun. And... you did your best. I'm sure the class won't be too upset that Katsuragi submitted your name."

She bounced out of the room, followed shortly after by the Class B students and most of Class C. Eventually, it was only Horikita and Ryuuen left here with me.

Horikita gave a look to the side towards Ryuuen, obviously concerned about him overhearing our conversation, but he was staying far enough away.

It was disappointing. I had been hoping to go for a total victory, but in the end my last plan had failed. Katsuragi had seen through it and submitted my name, instead of Horikita. It wasn't the end of the world, since we still had fairly good results overall, enough to secure us first place, but I was disappointed in myself. It wasn't like me to not be completely successful.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Hm?"

Horikita looked a little embarrassed at what she wanted to say, mixed with a bit of sadness. Clearly, she had high hopes that we would win this group. Out team was as good as it got from Class D, and if we struggled here, it was a worrying indicator for our future.

"Look, as much as I hate to say it, you did a good job figuring out the pattern. And you had a really clever plan for this group, just... maybe next time stick to something a little less complex. I know

you're pretty impressive, but you went too big this time. Try something you can understand, because I'm pretty sure this got out of control a little by the end."

"I suppose you're right."

That wasn't like Horikita at all. She was admitting I had done a good job, but also providing me with some advice. I didn't particularly care about winning Dragon group, but it was still a bit of a slight that she thought I had gotten wrapped up and confused by my own plan. While it hadn't worked out, it was Katsuragi seeing through the flaws, not me messing up.

"Thank you for your hard work, Ayanokouji-kun."

With that unexpected thank you, she left the room, leaving me alone with Ryuuen who had been listening in the entire time.

He made his way over to me, before stopping at my side watching Horikita leave the room.

"Suzune's gonna flip when she realises."

"She's going to be frustrated that she thanked me, that much is true."

He turned to me, a frustrated grin on his face.

"You played us."

"Perhaps."

"Kukuku remember this feeling, next time I'll make sure you lose."

There was nothing else to do but wait for now. The last interesting thing to happen would be the reveal at the end of the day, and I didn't feel like going back to my room where Hirata was hiding. For that reason, asked Ryuuen a question I was sure he would respond positively to.

"Want to get a drink?"

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The fourth day had come and gone. I had spent a while with Ryuuen discussing meaningless stuff, before he ditched me to go find some of his classmates, promising that he'd meet me again tonight, not wanting to miss it for the world.

And that was how I found myself at a table in a café a few minutes to 11, sitting with Ryuuen and most surprisingly Ichinose. It had been steadily filling up for the past half an hour, as it seemed to have become the designated meeting spot for the results announcement.

I could see on the far side Kikyou was sitting with a group of friends, talking and laughing about fun times they'd had on the cruise. Kanzaki was sitting with a few people from Class B, quietly discussing the day's events, trying to understand and hence improve their skills in the future, while Amikura did everything she could to piss him off. I watched as she bent around and licked his ear,

sending him toppling to the ground in a terrified heap, everyone around them cackling.

Katsuragi sat with Nishikawa, an air of superiority floating around them, such that no one else wanted to be near them. I wondered how long that would last.

Horikita was in a corner with Sudou and Miyaki, discussing whatever they were discussing.

"I'm shocked Honami. I knew Amikura was a backstabbing little witch, but I didn't think you'd side with her too."

The three of us were discussing how the exam had gone, and most significantly, the existence of a third party in Class B.

Ichinose gave Ryuuen a faint smile. "Well, not everyone is too happy with Kaznaki's leadership, especially after this exam. We're simply providing an alternative."

"Did he even do anything this exam?" I couldn't remember Kanzaki leading any big discussions or revelations. I had dominated the group almost completely from the get-go, but I also didn't know of any time he had actually made a move himself.

"He insisted on playing it cautious. Which would have been fine if no one else had done anything, like Class A, but all he actually did was condemn us to lose."

"Kukuku so is that it? He's done?"

I didn't think that would be the case, and Ichinose quickly agreed with me.

"No, it's really hard to blame any single person for the loss, since it was basically Ayanokouji-kun beating everyone. So, we can't really blame Kanzaki and force him to step down."

This was a completely unexpected development. If I had been asked at the start of the year which class would have the most problems with cohesion, I would have named Class C instantly. And yet, they were the only ones to not be experiencing a schism of leadership.

Katsuragi was finished. Sakayanagi would take control of Class A completely once we returned to school, with no one that I knew of to stand in her way.

Kanzaki was on his last legs, or at least had a significant portion of the class dissatisfied with his decisions. It wasn't his fault, but it was a leaders job to take responsibility for a loss, even if there was nothing they could do about it. In his place, Amikura would most likely take over. She wasn't the brightest, and I felt that Kanzaki was a better strategist than her, but she was certainly willing to do more than him, to take bigger risks, something that was much more interesting. And with Ichinose at her side, where she belonged as a supportive person rather than leader, Class B had very quickly

reformed themselves into a stronger class than before.

Of course, they weren't at that stage yet. For the moment, I suspected there weren't that many people dissatisfied with Kanzaki that they could force him to step down, and Ichinose probably didn't want him to do so. Stepping aside would be more in line with her beliefs and keeping him on as an advisor rather than crushing him like Sakayanagi had done to Katsuragi.

It was a stark contrast from the girl I met at the beginning of the year. Someone who was willing to be friends with everyone because she was kind, was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, who didn't seem to have any ulterior motive was a hard person to reconcile with the devious scheming girl before me. Kanzaki's betrayal had cracked something inside of her, and Amikura had taken advantage of it.

And Class D was about to experience a civil war.

"To be honest I'm still surprised you went along with Amikura. To purposefully sabotage your own class doesn't seem like you."

Another wan smile from Ichinose as I gave my honest opinion.

"I guess I've had my eyes open. It's a fine line, but if I want to protect my class and fight for Class A, then I have to be willing to make tough choices." Her smile turned serious in a flash. "But don't think that I'm giving up on them. I love them all, and I'll do everything I can to protect Class B."

"Kukuku you really fucking hate him don't you? Is this revenge Honami?"

Ichinose's face flashed for a second at the use of her first name, but let it by without comment. "Well, maybe a little. I can't help but be a bit happy that he lost so badly. After all, I offered him some advice in front of the class and he took the chance to insult me. It's a little hard to be kind after that." There was a slightly sadistic glint in her eyes as she told the story.

Kanzaki was clearly a bad leader if that had actually happened. A good leader values his followers and ideas, and to completely ignore Ichinose was foolhardy. She was known to be intelligent, and in general it was illogical to insult those beneath you, lest they rise up like Ichinose had.

It was interesting to see how she had changed her view on the school and her class. The optimistic naïve girl I met earlier in the year was almost completely gone, crushed by the past two exams and the assault of Sakura. She had become slightly jaded, more cynical to the way the school worked. This backstabbing, sabotaging the class, was something she wouldn't have even considered.

I wonder if she had recognised how far she had already fallen.

I wonder if she wanted to stop and return to how she was before.

I wonder how much further I can make her fall.

"It's really a shame that our plan didn't work out. I guess Class A did see through it."

Ryuuen, who had just taken a sip of his drink spat it out at Ichinose's words, falling to pieces with laughter.

She gave him a questioning look, but before she could ask for clarification the sound of a notification from the school reverberated through the room. A bit under a hundred different phones were here, and the collective noise bounced from wall to wall.

"Ah, the results!"

Everyone in the room had pulled out their phones to check the email, even me. I hadn't been able to confirm all the results, and clarification never hurt. Although, it seemed my fears had been unfounded. Everything had gone to plan.

Rat: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Cow: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Tiger: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Rabbit: Outcome #4. The traitor answered incorrectly.

Dragon: Outcome #4. The traitor answered incorrectly.

Snake: Outcome #4. The traitor answered incorrectly.

Horse: Outcome #4. The traitor answered incorrectly.

Sheep: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Monkey: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Rooster: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Dog: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Pig: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Based on those results, the increase or decrease in class and private points are as follows. "Cl" and "Pr" are used to denote "class points" and "private points," respectively.

Class A: Minus 200 cl, Plus 0.5 Million pr

Class B: Minus 150 cl, Plus 0.5 Million pr

Class C: Plus 100 cl, Plus 2.5 Million pr

Class D: Plus 250 cl, Plus 2.5 Million pr

"Dragon group... was Outcome 4?"

"Kukuku isn't it obvious Honami? Surely you can figure that much out."

And indeed she could, as a look of realisation appeared on her face at what I had done.

"You were never the VIP."

"Of course not. Katsuragi said it himself, only an idiot would honestly tell the group they were the VIP."

"And Nishikawa overhearing your plan?"

Ryuuen snorted. "I bet they felt pretty clever at hearing that, but I'm sure you knew they were there the entire time."

"I doubt they properly noticed me until I knocked my glass over. It was easy enough to talk loudly and make sure they heard."

It was a classic fallacy that humans fell into. When they pierced one veil, discovered one trick, the pride at doing so distracted them from the truth. When Nishikawa overheard my plan, she had been in high spirits at having gotten one over us, enough to not notice that it would be pretty stupid to explain such details in a restaurant filled with almost only Class A and B students.

I had been at breakfast when the school first allocated the VIPs. I looked at both of our phones and saw that Kikyou had been given the role, but that made winning our group that much harder. So, in that moment, I declared myself the VIP, and Kikyou caught on quickly, realising that she had to play along. I'm sure she could have managed it, but this gave me the micron amount of extra control. Not once were the true words that Kikyou was the VIP ever uttered, meaning that there was never a possibility of anyone but the two of us knowing

It was easy enough to unlock the sim chips with points and swap them, and from there the entire group progressed, turning all evidence away from Kikyou and onto myself, before 'failing' to shift it to Horikita.

It was still a failure, although the plan didn't have any real stability. If I had spent more time preparing it, perhaps Katsuragi really might have voted Horikita, but part of the purpose was for him to see through it.

"Ahh, you really confused everyone, Ayanokouji-kun. So many plans, I'm surprised you could even keep track of it yourself."

"Kukuku as if he struggled. This monster probably had it all planned out from the moment the exam was announced."

"Perhaps I did. But I'm sure you agree I held up my end of the deal, Ichinose?"

"Mhm, yep you sure did! Class A came last, just like you promised. And I trust you to keep up the rest of our deal." Ichinose beamed, bobbing her head

There hadn't been much of a change in the room since the results came out. Most of it was already expected, since everyone knew that all the groups had ended with probably correct names. I heard a few exclamations about Snake, Horse, Dragon and Rabbit groups but other than that there wasn't too much surprise.

Katsuragi was the biggest change. I could feel his stare from across the room, analysing and contemplating what had happened. I was sure he would figure it out, but there was nothing he could do.

Class A had suffered another crushing defeat under his leadership. They were the only class to have lost points during this break. Even Class B, who went down 150 in this exam was still at a net positive and was poised to take the place of Class A once the next semester began.

As it was, the current class standings were:

Class A: 958 (-200)

Class B: 1028 (-150)

Class C: 917 (+100)

Class D: 790 (+250)

Class D had experienced massive growth. The island exam could be explained away as a fluke, but no longer could we be ignored, looked down upon as simply a lesser class of defective students, doomed to fall to the wayside over the next three years.

Class A was the first class to fall beneath the threshold we were at on May 1st. They had officially become the first class to go down from our starting point, a worrying indicator of their future success.

"You really think it was worth it, Honami? Turning on your own class like that, and costing them 150 Class Points?"

"Ah, well it wasn't an easy choice." I could still see some indecision and regret at the results on her face. "But I don't think Class B was going to win this exam anyway, not the way we were. At least now we get something out of it, and we get to be Class A. I think that's worth it in the end."

She seemed to still harbour perhaps some doubts about her decision, but it was the road Ichinose had chosen. I could see she had the resolve to carry it through. She had changed drastically from the girl I first met.

"Bullshit. Being Class A is worth nothing right now. It don't mean shit until our last month at this school, and until then it's worthless. There's two classes about 100 points away, and at this rate Class D will beat everyone by thousands of points in our third year."

This was something I was sure Ichinose and Amikura had known, but I agreed that it was a valuable gamble. They now had an opportunity to take control of the class from Kanzaki, who was weaker than the team of two, and still retained their position as Class A. There were certainly worse outcomes that they had avoided by taking this risk.

"Ah, but Ayanokouji-kun owes us a favour."

"I take everything back, that's completely worth for you two."

They joked about the value of a favour from me. Of course, there was no contract stipulating that I owed them one, since nothing agreed to in this exam was enforceable, but I couldn't see a situation in which I wouldn't comply. There was no reason to back

out, as doing so would only grow a bad-faith relationship, and I was confident I could turn the favour into my advantage.

I also just had to make sure we never directly competed until I could force them to use it. Then I would be in the clear. I had no problem helping out Class B with the favour if it meant crushing Class A or C.

Once again, I thought back to the girl who had given me an ultimatum. If I was the monster she thought I might be, Ichinose had promised to get me thrown out of school. I wonder how that girl would reconcile with the one who had just pulled down her own class. It was a fascinating change in the beautiful smiling girl before me, not a hint of regret or sadness in her for her actions.

Our conversation continued on for a while, as the number of students in the café slowly dwindled. We got quite a few odd looks, being a strange trio to meet up, but I was sure that as the years progressed, the leaders of different classes meeting up wouldn't become such a strange occurrence. It was a competition yes, but healthy relations and deals were a valuable part of it. Even Ryuuen, the tyrant leader of the grade, understood the value in good relations, and even with his own class that he ruled with an iron fist, he didn't take it too far, being willing to accept help from those he recognised as valuable.

Eventually though, Ryuuen made to leave, but before he did he shared with us some valuable information.

"You can consider yourselves safe enough for now. I've got high hopes for Sakayanagi, and I want to see how much I can fuck with her." He leaned forward saying this, a hostile grin forming on his face. "But don't worry. I won't forget about you two either. Sooner or later we're going to play again, and I'm going to come out on top."

"I'll be looking forward to it Ryuuen."

"Do you worst Ryuuen. Class B will be ready for you."

"Kukuku you better be. I don't want to have to deal with that weasel Kanzaki again. See you later."

With that one of the most dangerous students in the school left us to our drinks. The instant he did so however, Ichinose drooped slightly, the energy draining out of her.

"Ryuuen's a lot to deal with, isn't he?"

"He's certainly got character. You can't slip up once when he's around."

It seemed Ichinose was struggling to balance her ability to be nice and restrain her frustration around him, while he asked her questions that confronted the very being of who she was. It was a fine balancing act, and she had handled it marvellously.

"You don't feel concerned around me though," I observed.

"Eh, there's something about you Ayanokouji-kun. I feel like no matter what I do you'll just see right through me."

"Perhaps so, but you're not in this just for yourself anymore. You have a partner in Amikura, and a class to fight for." I couldn't have her giving up now. Not when she showed so much promise and had yet to come challenge me.

She thought for a moment before brightening. "You're right. It's not just about me anymore. My past, my problems, they're not important. I need to fight for my class. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. Maybe you really aren't as bad as I thought." She finished off in a slightly guilty tone, of having considered someone something they weren't, but this was the change I had been looking for.

Ichinose Honami. What will you do now, now that you no longer face such restraints? How far will you go for your class?

These past two weeks had been interesting. It was exactly the type of excitement I had been hoping for when I gave up on my ordinary life.

I was sure it was only going to get more interesting. Sakayanagi was someone I still hadn't had a chance to compete with yet, along with Nagumo who had made it clear he would crush me at some point. That led me to believe there were inter-grade competitions, which opened up a whole host of possibilities.

As for the students in my grade, they were still settling into this new environment. For most of them they hadn't expected this sort of competition, not at this level, and even the leaders were still unsure, taking baby steps, prodding and poking each other to test each other's limits.

I couldn't wait for them to start pushing those limits as far as possible. Who knew what could happen?

Authors Notes:

So, that's the end of Arc 4. I hope you enjoyed.

Honestly, i'm so fucking glad this is over. Writing this was one of the more mentally challenging things i've ever done, constantly checking the results, names of students, making sure there were no errors. My spreadsheet had hundreds of updates over the past month, it's been hectic. Not to mention i've had to entirely rewrite the overall plot for this fic based solely on this arc. Holy shit, I'm glad it's done.

It was a lot of fun though. This was my original idea for the fic, this arc in particular, and seeing it come to light, as much as it has changed over the months is really satisfying. I'm super happy with

it, including the plot and the characters.

Did anyone see the twist coming? It might be a bit cheap, but i was stoaked to come up with it. If you look back, i never specifically mentioned that it was Ayanokouji's phone in Chapter 3. Hehe, sneaky genius author-san. My brain has melted, so that's it for now.

Ichinose character really going wild here. I'm going to have fun with her.

Over the next few days i'm going to be releasing four SS. I'm sure you can guess with reasonable likelyhood at who they're for, aside from Karuizawa which I already mentioned.

Arc 5 will be next. It's an emalgemation of Volume 4.5, but it's going to be diverging. It also won't have a strict plotline, much like 4.5, but there should be noticable differences, as well as hopefully a couple of original stories.

I'm talking KiyoKikyou not-date. Hype.

Anyways, that's all for today. As always, I hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 12.5.1 - SS Shiina 1

This school really was out of a novel.

To focus so much on competition between classes, to create an environment that seems completely fictional, I couldn't help but love it.

The drama, the intrigue, the planning and betrayal, it was all so dramatic, so mysterious, and I loved every second of it.

The library too, was magical. It was so much larger than any other I'd ever seen, with thousands of books I'd never read. Even if I spent every free second in there for the next three years it would be impossible to get through them all.

Everything about this school was like a dream come true for a bookworm like me. I couldn't wait to watch what happened.

Because at first I had no intention of getting involved. It was scary, worrisome, to have the fate of your class on your shoulders. I left that up to Ryuuen and the other braver students, who were willing and capable of planning in complex and intricate ways.

I had no interest in participating. I simply wanted to observe. I hadn't found anyone in the class that shared my interests in books, but that was fine. It was ok. I didn't mind having no close friends. Everyone in the class knew me, and I knew them and we got on well enough. That was enough for me.

At least that's what I had told myself.

It was disheartening, to say the least. I had thought that my isolation might end coming to this school. A school for the elite, the future leaders of Japan. I thought that maybe one of them would like to read, even enough that I could find a friend.

As much as I was ok with it, I also didn't want to go through school alone again. It was... empty.

A school this prestigious, a library that excessive, and yet I couldn't find anyone that liked to read. The odds of that happening were ridiculous.

I was sure there was someone in another class who would like to read. I couldn't possibly be the only one in all 160 students, but reaching out to another class was difficult enough, made that much harder by Ryuuen's attitude.

And then, I had to set aside my books and get involved. Something I hadn't even considered doing until that point.

I noticed what most people seemed to miss. What most people didn't want to notice because of his attitude, or because of their pride. What they would have to recognise if we were going to reach Class A.

Ryuuen was the best chance for our class.

Perhaps there were other potential leaders hiding in mediocrity, but I doubt it. No, out of everyone in the class, only Ryuuen was ruthless enough, smart enough, bold enough to dare challenge the other classes, to even have a chance going against other powerhouses.

And above all, it was clear that he did care for the class, in his own way. We were his tools, his pawns in the dictatorship, but we were **his** pawns. And he was fighting for us. Most people let their dislike for Ryuuen cloud their ability to notice that, but it was clear as day to me. Especially after what happened with Komiya.

It was Ryuuen's plan to mess with Class D, and it was clear as day that he felt responsible for Komiya's expulsion. There was no official statement from the school on what happened, but the story got out anyway.

Class D was responsible. That much I was sure of.

Ryuuen was intending to play with them a bit, just mess with Class D. And yet in retaliation they completely turned the tables on us.

It was at this moment I knew I needed to get involved.

Things had gone badly, extremely so. What should have been a simple plan had been twisted around and warped beyond understanding.

If I wanted to prevent situations like that again, I would have to step up.

And so I did. I put myself out there, gave Ryuuen advice on the island. I added to his plan, gave him ideas, and solidified my place as an advisor. Because, if I was by his side, I could make sure that never happened again. At least I could mitigate the risk.

But even with my help, Ryuuen's plan still failed.

I believed in it. It was a great plan, and it only fell apart because of one person. Ayanokouji. If it wasn't for him, we would have come first on the island.

I wanted to get closer to him, to try and understand him. He was incredibly smart, that much was clear. And luckily, we were put in the same group for the next exam.

But who could have thought he would be the friend I was looking for.

The thing I cared about more than the exams, more than the competition. I just wanted a friend, someone who shared my

interests. And, luckily, unfortunately, Ayanokouji was that person.

To think our greatest threat became my first friend.

He'd read so many books, perhaps even more than I had. And in those first two meetings, I'd never enjoyed conversing with someone so much.

And then he didn't care. To him, I was just another way of gaining information, just another person to defeat. For all the emotions I had, the excitement at making a genuine friend, someone who I thought understood me, someone a bit off, a bit different from society, just like me, he didn't care at all.

Ah, it hurt. To realise, once again, I'd been used and abandoned. Once again, who cared about me?

I couldn't understand him at all. No one could. Two exams, and two completely different methods of approaching them, complete opposites for that matter, and he won with ease.

On the island it was all reactionary. I heard the story from Ryuuen, how he took the mistakes of everyone, allowed them to play their game and made it his advantage.

And this time, he took the lead, a proactive role, and once again didn't falter.

This school wasn't the only thing out of a novel, Ayanokouji was. An overpowered protagonist, who was incapable of losing.

I hoped he wasn't, but it would be incredible to watch if he was.

But at the same time, he taught me a valuable lesson. This is a competition, but it's also a school. There's a blurred line between them, and sometimes you have to cross from one side to the other.

Friends, huh? He still wanted to be, even after he used me for information, just like I tried to do so in the first place.

Maybe it was possible. To love books together, and still be enemies. Constantly on guard, a battle of words and mind every time we met as to not give up secrets while still enjoying the company of someone who shares our hobby.

Even that, even something as simple as friendship is turned by the school into a political battle. Everything about this place was out of the ordinary. It was like living out a fantasy in a book.

Be ready, Ayanokouji. Prepare yourself, book buddy.

I'm not going to go easy on you.

Authors Notes:

I've written 4 SS for this arc. All of them are pretty short, being 1-2k words each, but they should give some more depth into some of the characters here.

Not much to say about this one. Shiina has always been a more forgettable character to me (i know, it's a sin), so I did struggle to

write her properly. As a student of Class C, she really didn't do a lot, despite the attention devoted to her by Kinugasa, so I've gone off on my own a bit here.

Depending on how much progress I make on arc 5 in the next few days, i might release these SS daily. It all depends on how confident i am on not falling behind. I still have to reread 4.5 and write my main plot points/determine chapters, but that should be a couple of hours at most, so hopefylly daily. Fingers crossed.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 12.5.2 - SS Amikura 1

Ah, poor Kanzaki. You had your moment. Time to step aside.

When the year began, I was so excited to go to this school. The school for the leaders of the future. 100% employment rate. Everything was perfect. And then, it only got better.

Ayanokouji cracked the system on the first day. I don't know how he did it, and I know that no one was close to figuring it out as fast as he did.

Then this school stopped being a means to an end. It became fun.

To compete with other classes, to clash and fight for the top spot. It was exciting. I was excited. I had a good class, in Class B. We had good leaders, with Kanzaki and Ichinose leading us. Ryuuen tried to mess with us, but we brushed off even that.

And then the Island happened.

We won, but at a great cost.

To be fair, I hadn't liked the decision to let Kaneda stay. It was clearly suspicious, and Kanzaki thought the same, but Ichinose was too kind. She didn't trust him, that was obvious in her efforts to keep him away from the card reader, but just letting him stay was a mistake.

And most of the class agreed with her, nearly causing our doom.

Except at the end of the day, Kanzaki is at the most fault.

The two of them were co-leaders. And yet, he allowed Ayanokouji to split them, to divide the class. A stupid, simple tactic, and it worked because Kanzaki got distracted with winning, and fed up with Ichinose's kindness, the thing that had united the class in the first place.

I was content taking a back seat. Out of our class I knew I was one of the more competent students, but up until then, I was confident in our class and our leaders.

I certainly wasn't expecting Kanzaki to fall victim to such an easy bait.

But in the end it worked, and our class split in two. Those who supported Ichinose and those who supported Kanzaki.

All of them were idiots.

Neither Ichinose nor Kanzaki were right. They had both made mistakes. Ichinose was too trusting. She couldn't be a leader. She was smart, and could unite our class easily, but I didn't think she

could make the tough decisions, do the things that needed to be done.

Kanzaki could, but in the opposite sense he didn't understand people well enough. I think he admired Class C a little, simply because of how efficient it was. He was smart, and he could lead us to victory, but he wanted to be followed and obeyed. His inability to work with people was displayed when Ayanokouji put it to the test.

The first thing he should have done was go to Ichinose. Work together. But instead, his pride took a hit, as it was insinuated that because he worked with Ichinose, her failings were his, and so he stood alone. Kanzaki couldn't unite the class.

In the end there was no option. I guess I get to play in the end after all.

I'm not as smart as Kanzaki, I know that. I'm not even close to Ayanokouji, Sakayanagi, Katsuragi and the other leaders. But I was different. Unpredictable. I was lovable, and could have the class back me up, and still do weird, different things. That creativity was something no one else in our class had. I had to be the X-factor for us because there was no one else who could.

There began my partnership. Not with Ichinose, but with my secret conspirator.

Himeno Yuki.

Out of everyone in the class, she was the person I felt matched my sentiments the most. She hid them well, but it was clear as day to someone who thought the same way that she wasn't satisfied. Even winning 180 points, the damage caused to our class with bad leadership wasn't good enough.

Occam's razor, right? If everyone is focusing on me, they won't even think to look for a secret partner, especially when I present Ichinose as that person.

Himeno can help from the side, and together we can lead Class B.

Ichinose wasn't suited to be a leader. She couldn't make the tough choices. But she could back me up, get the class to unite. That was why Ayanokouji had targeted us first, had done his best to split us apart. Because if we were united, it was that much harder to stop us.

Every other class employed subterfuge, secrecy, sabotage. That was their strength, and it didn't work against a truly united class. In that case it came down to a contest of skill, and then we stood a much better chance of winning.

It hadn't been hard to convince Ichinose to betray our class. She was in a poor spot emotionally, and while it left a bad taste in my mouth to do so, it made my attempts to get her on my side that

much easier.

Preying on the broken, huh. That's what I had come to.

But we couldn't afford to lose.

Out of everyone there was, I was naturally the most cautious of Ayanokouji. He was an unknown factor. The only thing I knew about him was that he cared about winning exams, and even then, only to a certain extent. If he really wanted to be class A, it was possible for him to have earned an extra couple hundred points in the zodiac exam, yet he chose not to.

I had no idea what made him tick, and that made him dangerous.

It was a risky move, sacking this exam. It could potentially backfire very severely, but I was confident enough that Ayanokouji would match our stipulation and cause Class A to come last. There was no contract, so there was no guarantee, but it was logical to target them. According to the school, they were the most capable class, and dragging them down as much as possible was the smartest choice for a reasonable human.

We couldn't get Kanzaki out yet. It was too hard to claim the exam was his fault, without revealing that one of our VIP's was leaked. He would obviously figure that out, as it was the only explanation for how Ayanokouji figured out the pattern, but most of the class would remain in the dark.

All this did was shake their already flimsy faith in Kanzaki. One more slip-up and he would fall.

Once again, it was a fine line to walk. Push too much, and the entire class would come crumbling down. Not enough, and we would lose but not take over leadership.

Kanzaki was a problem. He was smart enough to take the leadership of the class, competent enough that most of our classmates supported his leadership, but weak enough that we'd never reach Class A with him in charge. That was a guarantee.

I was under no illusions that I could easily bring us there. But the three of us were the best chance Class B had.

Anyway, things had worked out. When we got back to school, we'd be Class A. Already, one semester in, and we'd reached our goal. All I had to do was hold us here. That was a much more difficult task than it sounded.

We also had a favour from Ayanokouji, to cash in at any time. There was no binding stipulation on how to use it, but I didn't think he'd back out, even if we used it to beat his own class. That would be a stupid move. Even if it worked out, he'd decide to stomp us down himself after that.

I didn't want the Kanzaki treatment, after all.

I could tell Ichinose was still conflicted. She wanted to protect her

classmates. At the start of the year, she had been so keen, so excited, ready for the competition, and back then I had believed in her. But then something changed, and the fine balance she walked between wanting to fight, and the kind caring girl was snapped.

It was around the time that Komiya got expelled.

And so, Ichinose was broken somewhat, and it was clear as day. The previous fire she had was gone, at least a bit, as she curled up defensively. I had even been afraid at one point that she'd sacrifice any chance we had of winning just to protect even one person. For a leader, that simply wouldn't do.

I'm sorry Ichinose, but you're just as bad as Kanzaki as being the leader. And now I had to force her to break her comfort zone, to sabotage the class. Luckily it reignited her flame. Ichinose was back, as the uniter of the class, ready to help me lead them. Already she'd changed so much, and I couldn't wait to see what she became.

Ah, this was going to be fun. It didn't even matter if we got crushed this year, not really. Class D had proven it was possible to come back from the depths of hell, so even if I played around too much, I didn't mind.

Where's the fun in trying too hard anyway?

This school is a competition. People like Katsuragi are fighting with all they've got. Boooring. You need to live a little. Take a risk. Make a deal with the devil. Sacrifice everything, for a chance to win.

Besides, who wouldn't want to fight against Ryuuen. He's kinda cute when you think about it.

Authors Notes:

So, most significant part of this is probably the mention of Himeno. If you don't know who that is, i don't blame you. She's only mentioned once that I can remember, and it was in Y2V4.5. I know that there are some psychopaths who skip the .5 volumes for whatever reason, so there.

I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do with her yet. It was a spur of the moment idea to mention her here, but it gives some more flexibility. In the books, Class B is in my opinion the least developed, or at least close to Class A. We really don't know much about either of them, since the first seven books focused almost exclusively on C and D, so I've got a pretty decent amount of room to work.

On an unrelated note, I got to see Aria of a Starless Night yesterday. Pretty decent movie, good adaptation of the first progressive book. Unfortunately, I now have an undeniable urge to reread all the progressive books, and consume SAO fanfictions that i

long ago forced myself to stop reading. It's gonna be fun to balance that and writing this.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 12.5.3 - SS Karuizawa 1

Had I made the right choice?

That was the question that kept running through my mind.

Did I choose correctly? I had shifted my loyalties, abandoned Hirata for Ayanokouji, and I couldn't tell if that had been the right decision.

For almost four months, Hirata had been my pretend boyfriend. He knew the secret of my past, the thing I was so desperately afraid of; he didn't know about my scar.

He had stood by my side and elevated my standing. It was all that he did, but I was grateful. He kept me safe, kept me protected. When I was on top of the class, there was no way I could be bullied.

No way could I return to that horrid life I had before. I'd do anything to stop that.

Even... even bullying others.

If it kept me on top of the school, then I didn't care.

Besides, it wasn't like it was that bad. Nothing I did was even close to what I went through. It was just some shoves, a tease, talking behind their back. It was nothing. If it meant I was ok, then... then I could get through doing that much.

Things were great. I had friends, for the first time in years. People smiled when they saw me, genuine happiness, not looking down on me like I'm garbage. It was awesome. I was happy again. No longer was I that scared little girl, who was less than everyone else.

Now I mattered. Now I was someone; once again, I was human.

Those bullies had stripped away my humanity, forced me to be someone I wasn't. And then, I escaped. I had a new life here, a good life, free of all that. As long as I stood above everyone, no one could hurt me.

And, like, I didn't want to be mean. I never did anything that bad. I knew just how horrible it could be, and there was never anything that bad. I made sure of it. I don't want people to be hurt like that, just enough for me to be safe.

I don't mind if it's just a little bit.

Ah, if only I could keep telling myself that.

I hated it. I hated being the bitch, the queen of our class, the one always on top, the one who bullied and was never bullied. I hated

acting this way, pretending not to care, to be a bad person. I didn't like it at all.

I wanted to go back. Back to who I was before middle school, back to before the bullying, when everything was bright and happy, and I could be kind and friendly.

Back before my scar.

And now, I had to be the very thing I hated most, even just a bit. Just to keep myself safe.

It was all I could do to justify my actions. It was them or me, and that's how I slept at night.

But in the end, it didn't even matter. It all came crumbling down.

It didn't matter that I had worked so hard, acted so well, and been the top bitch in the grade. Even so, there were still people who bullied me.

Yeah, I pushed over their friend in the line. Honestly, I hadn't noticed. If I had I probably would have apologised, albeit later when no one else heard, but I would have. I wasn't trying to be mean.

But they wouldn't give it up.

Manabe and her friends. I could tell the sort of girls they were the instant they talked to me in Rabbit group. If the actually cared about Rika, I would have said sorry straight away. But I've been dealing with them for years.

Those are the kind of girls who bullied me before.

I could tell they didn't care. They didn't give a shit about Rika, and that made me more upset than anything. All they wanted was an excuse to be mean, to bully me instead.

The just wanted to be in the right to put someone else down. All that talk about Rika was for nothing.

And I was done bending over for girls like that.

I'd never give them the satisfaction of giving in to them.

And for the first time since coming to this school, I was in trouble.

And Hirata didn't help me.

All he said was some garbage about appologising and getting along. Couldn't he understand that wouldn't work?! Not with these girls! They were the worst, horrible, they didn't care about Rika. They just wanted to get even with me, and if I apologised, they'd just find something else. I tried to explain it, but Hirata just wouldn't get it. He couldn't understand. Gah, he was useless.

It needed to be ended now. Once and for all, they needed to be stopped. There was no stalling, pushing it aside. I understood how these girls worked, and Hirata didn't. He needed to do something.

Please, Hirata. Save me. I begged him.

And he did nothing.

His naïve ideals left me to dry, thinking that everyone could just get along. He abandoned me. He broke his promise.

And then came Ayanokouji.

I knew next to nothing about him. We rarely spoke, and none of my other friends often spoke to him either. The only person he really talked to was Kushida, and she was always very secretive about him, which I suppose was fair enough.

And yet, he appeared, kind and considerate of my plight. I didn't trust him of course, I couldn't trust anyone, but I felt less concerned about him for some reason. Out of everyone in the class, he was the one I felt was least likely to cause problems with me. Because I didn't think he cared about anything.

A genius, who won the island exam for us alone, and I'm pretty sure he didn't even try.

He offered me his help, if I ever needed it.

And in a moment of desperation, I took it.

It was terrifying, incredible to watch.

That bored empty look on his face as he easily beat up the three girls, and then forcing them to never tell anyone about it.

And then he proclaimed he'd help me.

I knew in that moment that he meant it. And that he could live up to the promise. There was something about the unknown that was Ayanokouji that made me believe those words.

But I couldn't give up on Hirata. Not yet. He abandoned me, yes, but he also helped me. For four months he gave up his own life to help me. I couldn't be thankful enough for that. I didn't need his help, not really, but it did help.

And yet, when it came down to it, even Hirata lost it.

I'd never been scared of him before. But now I was. Because he was just the same as the rest.

And once again Ayanokouji saved me.

Hirata was off to fight Horikita. He was acting as if he was marching to his death or something stupid, and just handed me off to Ayanokouji, as if it was his choice. No, I chose who I stood with.

And I would stand with Ayanokouji. Because he was the only one who didn't care.

Sure, he said he wanted to be my friend. Maybe that was true. He didn't have a lot of friends, and I could see why it would be hard for him to make them, but that wasn't his reason.

He wanted me to watch Kushida for him, make sure she was ok. It was his own weird way of caring for someone.

And because that was his reason, I could trust him.

He didn't care about me, not really. Not like Hirata did, or

pretended to do, or whatever was going on in his mind. He didn't hate me; he didn't like me. I was just a means to an end. And as long as it stayed that way, he'd help me. We would be useful to each other. And as long as that lasted, I could be safe.

It was... scary, to realise that Ayanokouji had beaten people up for me, in my defence. It was a scary thing to think about, that someone who seemed to not care about anything, would go that far for me.

I didn't want him to do to other people what had been done to me. Me being safe wasn't worth that.

But even so, I could get him to hold back maybe. Just protecting me was all that I wanted. I didn't want revenge. They had their own reasons, they could do what they wanted, as long as I was left out of it.

I just wanted to be safe.

I don't know if I had made the right choice.

I don't even know if I had made the choice myself, or if it had been made for me.

But I was stuck with it now.

Because Ayanokouji was all I had, the only person who could protect me.

It was scary. Someone who cared so little, was the only thing keeping me from returning to the hell I used to live in.

But for now, he was all I had.

Authors Notes

So, I know a lot of people dislike Karuizawa, but i hope this sheds some light.

Not much to say. One more SS after this.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 4 Chapter 12.5.4 - SS Kushida 2

Once again, we won another exam, thanks to the brilliant leadership of Kiyotaka. It was great to be getting more points and moving up the rankings. I would be receiving 25,000 points a month from Ryuuen thanks to Kiyotaka, and every bit helped. Having to be social and friends with everyone meant I constantly had to spend money.

Thank god that Kiyotaka cooked meals on my nights off, or I wouldn't be able to afford to eat.

I didn't care about the class competition, not really. The allure of 100% placement didn't bother me. I was competent enough that I could get myself into whatever I wanted on my own merit, or just find a wealthy man and live my life through high social circles, fulfilling my greatest desire. It was nice to have more points but having to fight with other classes only made my job to befriend everyone and learn all their secrets that much harder.

But everything was getting so much more complex. Kiyotaka found me useful, and kept me by his side in the exams, pushing me into a position of leadership. It wasn't where I wanted to be, because there was no faster way to alienate friends than to lead a battle against them, but... I suppose I could put up with it.

He had promised to keep me out of the leadership role and had been getting Horikita and Hirata to take over. But if he really needed my help, I suppose I probably wouldn't mind.

There was no one else he trusted, after all. Only me.

It was a scary thought. Kiyotaka was such an enigma, someone I didn't understand at all. And yet, he trusted me. And I trusted him.

I don't even know why I opened up to him. Things I hadn't ever told to my closest 'friends', feelings I had never admitted out loud, to anyone ever. And yet, I had told him. All of my darkness, my hatred, everything that was wrong with me, I for some reason let it out to him.

And he didn't care. He still trusted me, even after all that.

It was... something new. Something different. Never once in my life had I opened up to anyone, let anyone know the real me. And yet here was the biggest enigma, because that was the only word I had to describe Kiyotata, I had ever met, and he didn't even care.

This feeling... what was it?

Even now, looking back, it was embarrassing to remember how I acted. Throwing myself at him, like a lovestruck teenage girl. That wasn't me. I was the one who knew the secrets of those girls. No, it was joy. Hope, a ray of light in my dark life. The first person to accept the real me. How could I ever give that up?

The apathetic, emotionless, ruthless genius who had no idea what a normal life was like. Constantly I was seeing him try things that no one else would. Weird, unusual things, much like a child. He tried five times watered down coffee, just to see what it was like.

And then there were the things he said. About never experiencing trust, about never having a friend, or being close to his parents. It wasn't completely unusual, but there was something strange about it, something unnatural...

Ah, but I couldn't understand him. It was enough that Kiyotaka trusts me.

I had opened myself up to him. It was something I never thought I'd do in my life, not truly, but I had. And now there was no choice but to stand by his side, not that I'd ever choose anywhere else to be.

Kiyotaka offered me power, influence, but most of all...

He offered me genuine, indiscriminate friendship. Something I had never once had in my life. It was amazing, the warmth of another human who cared. Something I had missed for as long as I could. He filled a gap inside of me that I had forced myself to ignore, until I no longer remembered how a person should feel.

And for that, I would support him as much as I could.

I felt in some way that I did the same for him.

Someone who self-professed to never know what a close human relation was, and I could be there for him. It was the least I could do, to show him what it was like to have someone who cared, and I was more than happy to do so.

Two damaged people, helping each other heal.

Then there was Horikita.

My nemesis, my enemy, the biggest threat to the sole purpose of my life.

Kiyotaka had promised he would help me expel her. And yet, he seemed to not be making any attempt to do so.

But, in this particular case, I didn't mind.

Some interesting rumours had begun to fly around our class. Tensions were rising, seemingly out of nowhere. People had begun to notice the strange change in behaviour of two well-known figures in the class.

Horikita and Hirata seemed to have a problem with each other.

Surprisingly, no one knew what had happened, or why they were

out for blood. All I knew was that they had been quietly talking to people, building networks, and testing the waters on how our classmates would stand, if it came to a conflict.

It was incredible.

I had known it would be hard to expel Horikita. She's a model student, and for her to ever make a mistake that would result in her expulsion would be very unlikely. I knew that even Kiyotaka would struggle to get rid of her, although not for a moment did I doubt that he could.

But if he was simply biding his time, waiting for his opportunity, and in the meantime playing this game, then I was more than happy to play along.

He hadn't told me anything about this, at least not yet. But I was sure it was him. I could sense his hand behind everything going on between them, antagonising the two against each other, in a way that other people couldn't even fathom. In a way that even I, with all my secrets as leverage, would struggle with.

He had potentially turned two of the best students in our class against each other and done so without anyone realising.

It was beautiful, amazing. So subtle, and yet we could watch from the sidelines as our class collapsed into anarchy.

It could even be part of his plan to expel Horikita. I had absolutely no idea.

Usually not knowing would terrify me.

But if it was Kiyotaka I strangely didn't mind.

Because I trusted him.

I believed that he would come through, that he would fulfil his promise and get rid of Horikita. And then, when there were no more dangers, it would be just the two of us, together, ruling this school.

Yes, Kiyotaka knew me better than anyone. He knew my secrets, my lies, my true self. He should have been my greatest enemy, someone I hated more than anyone, more than Kasumi.

And yet, there was no one I trusted more. No one I would rather fight for, fight with, stand by their side, his side.

It was unthinkable, that in four months I would change who I was so drastically. To go from fighting alone, to seeking out the company of my partner.

Yes... partner. That's what we were. Partners.

The old me would have scoffed, been betrayed, disgusted that I would give up such secrets. And yet, I couldn't find it in me to care.

One exception. That's all it was. I would never, could never, trust anyone else, no one. I would forever be bound by my curse, my desire, to know the secrets of everyone. I didn't care that I was

damaged like that, because that's all I've ever wanted.

But I could make an exception for Kiyotaka.

It was terrifying. I couldn't even tell if he was honest or lying, with his never-changing face he gave nothing away. He could think I was absolute dirt and was just saying what I wanted to hear, and yet... I didn't care.

Ahhh... what a mess this all is. I'm so pathetic, to be acting like this.

I guess, in the end all that matters is that I'm by his side. The safest place in the world, and the most powerful position to hold. To have the favour of the devil incarnate and fight alongside him.

What more could I ever want?

Authors Notes:

So, there we have it. Kushida SS, because i thought it was important to address what she went through. I would have liked to do a Horikita or Hirata chapter, but it's getting excessive at this point, and I'd rather save those for future events.

I did my best to avoid mentioning the words love or attraction, because right now (no promises for the future) that's not what she feels. Ayanokouji is providing her with something she's never truly experienced before, and so her relationship to him is more infatuation, curiosity and a desire for more of the same. There might (read: definitely) be some romatic feelings mixed in, but in her conscious mind its the allure of something new that draws her to him right now.

So, that's the end of Arc 4. Holy shit, what a journey. It's been months since i started writing, and I'm still enjoying it just as much as I was back then. One third of the story is complete now, two thirds to go.

This fic reached 100k reads yesterday, which is an insane number. Thanks to all the people who congratulated me for it, it's something i never expected, nay dreamed on when I began writing this stupid idea i had in my head. Yes, i still cringe at the name sometimes, but it's my fic and I love it. I'm never going to stop writing it, at least until i reach the proper ending, and I hope there's always people who are here to enjoy it. It's a pleasure to share my work and ideas with all of you, and hopefully this can continue for many months.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 5 Chapter 1 - Birthday Shopping

"I don't understand why I would need to get a present."

Kikyou sighed in frustration, before collapsing down onto my bed in front of me. "Look, don't you care at all about how the class sees you? What am I saying of course you don't. But it does matter. Do you have any idea what most people in the class think of you?"

"A loveable trustworthy friend?"

"No, that's me. Most people think you're a dick. Sure, you pulled it back by being useful in the last two exams, but it doesn't change the fact that most people can't stand you."

That was the same conclusion I had drawn, which made me even further baffled as to why I was involved with a birthday. "If that's the case, why would I be welcome at a birthday party?"

"Because Inogashira is one of the few people who doesn't dislike you." She sat up, frustration at my befuddlement evident on her face. "You might not care what other people think of you, but it's important to have a good image."

The evidence of that statement was sitting on my bed lecturing me right now. "That doesn't apply to me though. I don't need them to cooperate. I get nothing out of making an effort."

It was an interesting argument she posed, one that almost all people who sought a powerful position would follow. It was important to have a good image, as someone likeable and trustworthy, reliable and kind. To act like Hirata, or to live like Kikyou did. It was an easy method to get people to like you, and in turn gain the benefits of such connections.

The only issue with that was I didn't need them. If I wanted to become someone's friend for their help, then I would. If I needed assistance, there were multiple ways to ensure someone's loyalty. This was simply too much effort for something I didn't care about.

Kikyou jumped up and marched towards me. "That's. Not. The. Point." She argued, punctuating each word with a poke of her finder. "There's about eight people in the class who don't mind you, at least enough to put up with you. The rest of them hate your guts. You can win as many exams as you like, take all the credit, nothing will change. No amount of class points is enough to change their opinions. Most of those retards are delusional enough to think we can win without you, that Horikita or Hirata could take your place.

And if you don't change that, sooner or later there's going to be a serious problem!"

She finished her tirade with a shout, panting slightly from the energy behind it. It seemed Kikyou felt much more strongly about this than a simple concern over my image. But what could... oh.

"Are you worried about me?"

It was a concern I had taken under consideration months ago. My attitude was generally disliked by the class from the very first day, but I didn't find that too concerning. There was no one in there that gave me cause for concern in the event they turned on me and tried to expel me. It was possible that their negative feelings could be manipulated by Sakayanagi or Ryuuen, but even then I wasn't worried, since my classmates would inevitably make a mistake.

The only real danger came in the form of special exams, and even then, I was confident in my ability to succeed. If the class ever seriously had a problem with me, I could publicly make myself valuable enough to keep, and dissuade all but the most determined gremlins from their crusade against me.

No, I had nothing to be concerned about. But clearly Kikyou did. She must have made the same calculations, the same considerations, but without knowing the extent of my capabilities there was still room for doubt in her mind. And that worry led to this conversation, and her own way of trying to help me succeed.

"Obviously. Jeez, I'm trying to help you here. Getting people to like you is literally what I do best."

I could feel the exasperation flowing through the room as she crossed her arms staring angrily up at me. I gave her an amused look in response.

"You do know I've got everything under control, right?"

"Don't be so sure. You're playing a dangerous game here Kiyotaka," she responded, wagging her finger at me.

I reached out and brushed her hair, but it didn't affect her at all, or at least I couldn't detect a change in her outward appearance. She seemed to be too set on this to get flustered right now.

"Hey, I'll be fine. There's nothing to worry about."

"Can you just let me be concerned for my friend? Is that too much to ask for?"

I sighed. There was still one big problem with the situation, but to calm her down, and give her a micron of control over my safety was something I could sacrifice, if it ended this ridiculous conversation. "Fine, I'll buy her a present."

"Ugh, thank god. You know, for a smart guy, you really don't think through the most basic shit. Seriously, I'm not even asking you to turn up. All you had to do was..."

She paused, her words falling off track as her eyes widened slightly. I could see the gears turning in her mind as she uncovered my real issue with the situation.

"Have you never bought someone a present, Kiyotaka?"

My deepest secret was revealed.

"Yeah. I've never given or received a present before, and so I lack the customary understandings to make an appropriate purchase."

Silence filled the room at my words, Kikyou simply staring at me, trying to process my words. Her mouth had dropped open slightly, and all she could do was blink, trying to understand how someone lived their life without ever getting a present. Cute.

"You've... never gotten a present before?"

"Yeah. I guess you'll have to help me pick one out." I could use the internet to find a good present idea, but this was a chance to segue away from my unordinary childhood. I didn't want to be asked questions about it, and luckily Kikyou picked up on this, the pity disappearing from her eyes slightly, taking the hint that I wanted to move on.

"Well, as sad as that is, I can't just leave you alone now. I bet you'd do something really dumb and get her something romantic."

"I can see that being a distinct possibility."

Fortunately, the awkward air was gone already, and Kikyou had transitioned back into teasing me for my lack of common sense.

"Right. You and I are going to Keyaki Mall tomorrow, and you're going to pick something out for Inogashira. You don't have to show up for long but get her something."

"Right."

"And then, you're going to buy me something, as a reward with putting up with you."

"Right."

Wait what?

I looked down to see the smirk on Kikyou's face. I'd fallen right into her trap, although I hadn't made any effort to avoid it.

Sighing in defeat, I made my way into the kitchen to prepare a couple of drinks, only to find Kikyou had followed me there.

"Tea?"

She gave me an affirmative response, and I put the kettle on. It was too late at night for coffee, and a cup of tea was always a pleasant way to relax before going to sleep.

We stood there in the kitchen in a comfortable silence. I could see her gaze drifting off towards something beyond regular sight, as her mind wandered to whatever it did.

Predicting actions was easy, it was simple to determine how people would react, based on their ideals, values and goals. Using

those I could come up with high probability outcomes, and then react to them ahead of time. To anyone else it might even appear as presience.

Knowing what someone was thinking about was much more complex. For simple people like Ike and Yamauchi, it was rather straightforward. They never hid their intentions or thoughts, making it simple to extrapolate and build a model to accurately predict their minds. People like Matsushita were more complex. There were multiple underlying patterns to her mind, making it harder to predict what she would be thinking at any given time. It was still simple to predict actions, but since they could result from a variety of indicators, thoughts were more sporadic.

I couldn't even come close to understanding Kikyou's mind. Instead, I broke the silence with a question.

"What's so special about Inogashira?"

"Huh?" Her eyes regained focus as she turned her attention to me at the question.

"There's been a bunch of birthdays in our class, let alone the grade. This is the first one you've cared about me being involved in. Why?"

The obvious reason was that we had grown closer on the cruise, but I didn't think that was all it was. There was a slight hesitancy to her actions, fingers fidgeting behind her back as she pondered the best way to respond to my question.

"Well... Inogashira doesn't have a lot of friends. She's pretty quiet, so I wanted to help out."

"That's it?" I was sure there had to be more, seeing as Kikyou seemed almost embarresed about it.

"Well... yeah, I actually want to help her."

"So, it's not just a strategy to boost your own popularity then?"

"Look, I don't hate everyone I meet, ok?!" Once again Kikyou was yelling at me in indignation, frustrated at my one-dimensional understanding I had of her. It was an easy misconception I had picked up though, given that she had never once complimented someone honestly, as far as I knew.

"Sorry, I just assumed—"

"Well, un-assume then. Inogashira's not that bad. She's really quiet, so it's easy to hang out with her. Honestly, she's really not that bad."

Her head tilted away from me, avoiding eye contact as she tried to hide the blush in her cheeks. It was embarrassing for her to admit this to me, to admit that she'd changed from the single-minded hate machine that I knew before. I had to commend her bravery for admitting and recognising this change within herself. It

would have been incredibly easy to ignore it and continue as she had been before.

This was a new change. Before the cruise, I was sure that Kikyou would never have considered, or even acknowledged that she could actually like a person, and not see them simply as part of her endless quest for self-satisfaction, but something had changed. Somewhere along the line, she had gained a new appreciation for the people around her, at least enough to give a helping hand to someone she didn't despise completely.

In the end, there was only one way to respond to that confession.

"Sugar?"

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

A bright sun hung in the cloudless sky, basking the campus in a warm light. The hot August weather beat down on the grounds, and if it wasn't for the cool breeze flittering through the air, I was sure the weather would be unbearable for most people.

It was fairly busy, as I made my way to Keyaki Mall, with many students taking the opportunity to get out in the sun and relax. I had heard the pool would be opened at the end of the week, but for now the best way to get out of the heat was the mall, and there was a constant stream of students walking along the same path as I was.

Reaching the entrance, I made my way inside the mall, a blast of cool air washing over me as the air conditioning mixed with the heat outside. It was a welcome relief, and I could see the same feeling expressed on the faces of those entering, while those heading back to the dorms featured a pained expression at the heat returning.

"Kiyotaka-kun! Over here!"

I turned, hearing my name called, only to find Kikyou waiting for me near the entrance. It wasn't quite the time we had agreed to meet, but it seemed both of us had arrived early.

I was momentarily stunned when I saw her. She was waiting for me outside the ice-cream store, double scoop chocolate in one hand, while she waved to me with the other. She had a lovely blue top on that complimented her figure well, along with a short, checkered skirt, rippling slightly as she greeted me. Long white socks stretched up to her thighs, an unusual look for her but not at all a bad one. A brilliant smile was on her face, marred only by the dab of ice cream on her nose.

In other words, cute.

I made my way over to her, before attempting one final time to get out of it. "Is this really necessary?"

"Ne, Kiyotaka-kun, that's no way to greet a girl," Kikyou complained, pouting at my lack of charm.

"I don't particularly care, and neither do you." I turned to move away from the ice-cream shop, and began to move down the mall, taking a look at the shops around me. Surely something here would make for a good present. Noticing I was leaving her behind, Kikyou scurried to catch up to me, gracefully making sure she didn't drop her ice-cream by holding it in place with her mouth.

"Well, I wouldn't mind if you were a little nice to me. It's the fastest way to a girl's heart after all."

"Fine then." I turned my head to the side, giving her a very obvious one-over. "You look really cute today."

"You don't look too bad yourself, Kiyotaka-kun." Despite her casual response, there was clear blush on her cheeks from my compliment. "Now all you have to do is get some clothes other than your uniform, and I'm sure you'll be very handsome."

"Why would I? I'm comfortable enough like this."

"That's not the point. Don't you want to look good for me?"

"Once again, why would I?"

My intentionally rude response resulted in a soft punch to my arm, and we continued on, meandering slowly through the mall bantering as I looked for a present to buy. The trouble was, I had absolutely no idea what to get.

"So, what did you decide on, Kiyotaka-kun?"

I wasn't certain, but I had given it some thought last night. My idea couldn't be terrible right? I might as well make an attempt.

"I was thinking perhaps some jewellery would be—"

"NNNN!" My response was interrupted by a negatory sound from Kikyou, accompanied by a large cross from her arms. "Terrible idea. Jewellery is from girls only, or you're trying to tell her you like her romantically. Try again!" I was instantly shot down.

"Then maybe some clothes, perhaps a jumper," I suggested, once again struggling for ideas.

"Hmm, not bad. But you don't know her size or what would suit her. Too risky, but a better idea." Apparently I was on the right track, but it still wasn't correct.

I stopped walking for a moment, looking around the mall for ideas. There was every possible shop one could need, but I had no idea what sort of gift Inogashira would prefer. Something useful, something sentimental? This wasn't my forte, and despite Kikyou professing to help me, she had simply been negating my previous suggestions while not offering any ideas herself.

Eventually though, I realised a simple solution.

"A gift card," I decided.

Another beaming smile formed on Kikyou's face at my words, and she clapped her hands together in celebration. "Way to go,

Kiyotaka-kun! You figured out a good first present."

"That was a lot more difficult than I though." I began to move again, heading in the direction of the mall gift store.

"Eh? Where are we going Kiyotaka-kun, you didn't tell me for which store."

"Which store? I was just going to get her one of those universal gift cards." The mall had a gift card available for purchase which worked at any store here. No matter what you wanted, even Karaoke or a cinema seat, you could get it with those cards.

Kikyou facepalmed at my words. "No, you can't do that. That's like saying 'I don't really care so I bought something with little effort'. If you're getting a gift card, it has to be for a store you think she'd like. At least pretend you care."

Now that she had explained it, I could see the point Kikyou was making. Even so, I had no idea what store Inogashira would be interested in. "Please." I practically begged her to end this torture.

"Ah, fine, I guess you've done well enough. Come on, there's a shop that all the girls like, you can get her a gift card for there." Kikyou grabbed my wrist and dragged me along as she bounced back through the mall, navigating her way through the crowds like a professional.

Along the way we ran into a few of her friends, who were out for similar reasons, having just purchased gifts for Inogashira. After confirming that no one had the same thing so far, an apparently important distinction, we continued on until Kikyou stopped in front of an entirely pink store. Frivolous objects like stuffed animals and cell phone accessories lined the shelves. It felt as though the shop was trying to squeeze private points out of the students.

It was clear why students would enjoy shopping here.

"This is the place?"

After receiving a nod of confirmation, I cautiously made my way forward, entering into the pink wonderland before me.

Surprisingly enough, I wasn't the only boy here. There were three to be exact, totaling Ike, Yamauchi and Katsuragi.

"What's Katsuragi doing here? I wonder who that present is for..."

As expected, Kikyou's mind went into overdrive, trying to figure out the five W's as to Katsuragi's presence in this relatively exclusively female store. He was doing his best to hide a present in his bag, one explicitly designed to be purchased as a gift, but his intentions in this store at least were clear.

I would have liked to follow up on that. Katsuragi would be considered a non-entity from now on, at least in regards to social standing in Class A. He was still a formidable student, but his leadership wasn't a concern. His presence as a spy, however, was

something I was very interested in leveraging. Whaever his business here was, I was sure it could be used in some way.

Incredible. I really had become Kikyou.

I moved to approach him, but unfortunately it was not to be, as the idiot duo had noticed our presence and decided to ambush me.

"Aauughh you traitor!"

I felt two hands grab either side of my arms, before dragging me away from the entrance and over a few isles away. All I noticed was the greasy grip that covered my arms, and the shocked look on Kikyou's face as I was dragged away.

"Care to explain what just happened?"

I gave the two boys in question a glare, resulting in them very quickly releasing their grip on my arms and moving backwards with a shiver. I hadn't put up any resistance because it was amusing to see what they had planned, but clearly their actions had been spur of the moment, without any consideration for what came next.

The power of stupidity prevailed over my glare, and it didn't take long for Ike to pull himself together.

"What do you think you're doing with Kikyou-chan! We're supposed to be birthday shopping with here, and then you show up being dragged along by her!"

"How'd you do it, huh? Did you bribe her or blackmail her? I always knew you were scum, Ayanokouji!"

I sighed, putting my hands in my pockets. There was no reasoning with such hormonal rage, so I may as well make the most out of this.

"Maybe she just likes me more than you two."

The insinuation that I could possibly be more likeable to such a girl as Kikyou was infuriating to the two teenagers confronting me. Ike at least had the self-control to not react severely, but Yamauchi lost all sense of time and place.

Reaching out, he grabbed my collar, bunching it with his fists and dragging me down slightly towards his face. I could smell his bad breath from here, and a few drops of spittle flew onto my face through his rage.

"Shut up! You're just a selfish little bastard, aren't you? I bet Kikyou-chan hates every moment she spends with you, like the disgusting trash you are!"

"And yet," I paused, doing my best to string out his patience, "I'm the one she's birthday shopping with. Perhaps you idiots are the real trash."

Yamauchi's eyes were practically bursting out of their sockets by now, a vein popping on his face from the rage, but those words were the last straw. In his anger, he didn't even think about where

we were standing, and threw, or rather lightly shoved, me backwards. Instead of resisting though, I allowed myself to fall.

Right into the unbalanced shelf behind me, covered in glass collectables.

A loud shattering sound fills the store, as the shelf topples over along with me, and every single little glass object shatters against the floor. There was a slight pain in my back from the pressure, and I could feel some glass stuck in my arm, but it wasn't worth worrying about.

"Kiyotaka-kun!"

A blur, and suddenly Kikyou was at my side, checking up on me. It was clear that I wasn't badly hurt, since I had already been moving to get up, but from the grin she flashed, it was clear she had been watching and knew what I had done and was playing along.

"What is going on over here?!"

Unsurprisingly, the store worker had made her way over very quickly upon hearing the commotion. A furious look was on her face, and I could see her eyes darting around the mess, probably calculating the total damages.

Dotted throughout the store there were clusters of girls looking over in shock, pointing and whispering to each other. I was sure this story would spread throughout the school before long.

"Yamauchi-kun, why did you push Kiyotaka-kun?" A few tears rolled down Kikyou's face as she gently helped me up, brushing a few pieces of glass off of my skin. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. Thank you Kikyou. I wasn't expecting to get shoved." I directed the last part towards Yamauchi, who was staring at the situation unfolding before him in shock-horror. I don't think he even cared about the damage he caused but was more horrified by the way Kikyou was treating the two of us.

"Kikyou-chan... but..."

"Do you have any idea how much damage you've done, young man?"

The worker, obviously having heard the story and in fact having been watching from the corner of her eye since the start, was satisfied with the story enough to turn towards Yamauchi. Ike, realising the situation his friend was in, did what he did best and snuck his way out of the store, abandoning Yamauchi to his fate. Since he had nothing to do with the incident, no one bothered to stop him.

"Ayanokouji you bastard! You let me push you, it's all your fault! Hanging out with Kikyou-chan, when she's supposed to be with me!"

An awkward silence filled the store as he said this, Yamauchi's

rage making him incapable of recognising any of this was his fault, nor that what he said was absurd.

"Right, well you've caused over 100,000 points of damages here, and you're going to have to pay it back."

"What?! I can't pay that back, I don't have that much! Besides, it's Ayanokouji's fault too, he was the one who hit the shelf!"

"Remind me, who pushed me into it for no reason, Yamauchi?" I had expected him to react erratically, but not to this degree. He simply was incapable of accepting the blame for this situation.

He continued his ranting and raving, while the rest of the store stood passively, listening to his pathetic pleading. During this, I subtly took Kikyou's hand and gave it a squeeze, as a reminder to not lose her cool. Her face was strained, in a desperate effort to not start yelling at him herself. His constant reasoning as to his possession of Kikyou as an excuse was getting on even my nerves, so her resolve to no yell back at him was incredible.

Eventually, a couple of mall security guards showed up, and when Yamauchi refused to leave, insisting that I payed for the mess, one of them picked him up and threw Yamauchi over their shoulder, before walking off, ignoring the tantruming kid hitting their backs repeatedly.

"I'm terribly sorry about that sir. If there's anything I can do to make up for that incident, I'd be happy to help."

Now that Yamauchi was gone, the store had started to return to order. A cleaner had shown up and began to sweep up all the broken glass, and the worker had rightened the shelf, although it now stood empty in the store.

I glanced at Kikyou, who was wearing a well-deserved smug grin, entirely pleased with the outcome.

"As a matter of fact, there is. Do you sell gift cards for this store?"

The worker brightened, realising that she could in fact help the customers who had been mistreated so badly.

"We do!" Moving over to the sales counter, she grabbed a blank one from the pile, and a marker from the draw. "How much would you like to put on it, sir?"

"10,000 points should be enough."

I heard a slap from beside me as Kikyou facepalmed once again. Apparently 10,000 points wasn't enough for a gift. Birthday shopping sucked.

Authors Notes:

Here we go with Arc 5. This one will be a shorter one, and I'm going to do my best to bring back some more humor instead of

serious exam stuff for this arc. I might've gone a little overboard here with Ayanokouji's lack of knowledge of presents, but it was enjoyable to write, so there we go.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 5 Chapter 2 - Big Brother

After we had finished at the now-destroyed shop, Kikyou and I parted ways. She was off to see a new movie with some friends, and so I headed back to my room with a 3000-point gift card in hand.

Nothing else had come up, and so I had nothing to do with my time but wait for the next semester to start.

As expected, the rest of the day passed in a rather uneventful manner. Holed up alone in my room, I smashed through a book I hadn't had a chance to read before, Atlas Shrugged.

It was a fascinating book to read, especially since it hadn't been included in the White Room's literature, which was both parts surprising and expected.

Atlas Shrugged was written around the philosophical system of Objectivism, created by the author, a philosophy that may seem radical to some. The system, and the story written to present the idea, focuses very heavily on the strength of the individual, and resistance to any over governing body, or even the rejection of the collective. Objectivism emphasises the individual as the most important individual, which is why it was so contradictory to the White Room.

That place had been created to prove that anyone could be raised as a genius, as a superior human, no matter their origins, a theory where everyone would work to make a stronger society, directly in conflict with Objectivism. The White Room presents humans as all equal in the beginning, and the benefit of the system they were developing to work for the beterment of society, directly in contrast to the view of Ayn Rand.

And yet, during the training, the instructors and that man only cared about the best, emphasising competition, and the strength of the individual. Each student was taught to fight for themselves, to work to improve themselves to beat those around them and become the best.

They trained us, raised us to focus on the individual, while using that data to devise a method of improving education for the collective.

The novel was also very heavily anti-government, something heavily frowned upon. The order to society was an important aspect in that place, and such a radical work would go directly against that

line of thinking.

I wasn't at all surprised that works presenting this philosophy weren't present in the available literature.

Of course, I wasn't sure if I believed in Objectivism myself. The ideology was inherently selfish, to incite each person to work exclusively for themselves, putting their own desires above others. Whether that was wrong, I wasn't sure. Selfish, yes, absolutely, it was the definition of selfish. According to society, being selfish is a negative trait, as we are incentivised to work as a collective, which involves working for other people, but of course, it was entirely possible that society was wrong.

Who's to say that one way of thinking is really better than any other.

Rand described Objectivism as the concept of a man with "his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life". It may be selfish, but can it truly be wrong to work for your own happiness, to make that the main goal of your life? Many people would claim that utilitarianism, the desire for the result that contains the most 'good' is the best decision making framework, and simultaneously say that working for your *own* good primarily is the wrong decision.

People can work their whole lives for the betterment of others, and that's selfless, but to choose yourself over other people is selfish, and we humans have arbitrarily decided one is better than the other.

Of course, there is evidence, where working for the collective does provide more benefit, but humans are naturally selfish. The tendency of animals is to work for themselves, as a survival instinct, and that isn't something we have lost.

I suppose in the end, like all ideologies and philosophical systems, they are inherently flawed. Due to human nature none can be followed. There's nothing wrong with being selfish, with prioritising yourself, as long as it isn't done at the detriment of others. And it is arguable that choosing yourself is always detrimental, yet the line must exist at some point, or the world would be full of people without any sense of self-preservation, giving so much they forget to care for themselves.

That was reminiscent of the Abnegation in the children's series Divergent. The balance of good amounts of selfishness was the dividing factor. And that was something that people would never agree on.

The conclusion I drew from finishing the book?

The individual is selfish, and prioritising yourself comes at the detriment of others, but to rely on others makes you weak.

Also, that it's a work of fiction, and everything should be taken

with a grain of salt. There's no system that pleases everyone, after all.

I considered asking Sakayanagi for her opinion. I was sure she would have some fascinating insights, but it was already late at night, so it would have to be another day.

The lateness of the hour was what made it surprising when I received an invitation to meet the next day. It seemed that Manabu had things he wanted to discuss with me.

There were a myriad of possibilities for the topic of our meeting, so there was no sense attempting to determine it now. Besides, I hadn't had a good game of chess in ages.

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The next day I made my way to school, just before the time we had agreed to meet. As expected, there was no one around. You had to wear your school uniform to be on the grounds, even on the holidays, and since there was no reason for anyone to be here, there was no reason to get changed, and hence no one to disturb my upcoming meeting.

It had been a while since I last saw the president, not since the trial towards the end of the first semester. He was definitely one of the best students in the school, and I enjoyed his company. If anything, he at least possessed enough rationality to be able to speak on a reasonable level, something most of my grade lacked.

"It's so hot..."

Unlike yesterday, the air was burning, the previous breeze nowhere to be found. The sun was beating down on me, not in the warm relaxing way of the previous day, but in a brutal, uncaring fire.

I could feel myself sweating slightly in the long-sleeved winter uniform, and so I increased my pace, desperate to reach the airconditioned student council room as fast as possible.

Entering the building, the hallways stretched out before me, an eerie silence only broken by the echo of my feet on the floor. It was disturbing, to say the least, to see the usually busy building so empty, so devoid of life. Rooms that should be full of students empty.

If it wasn't so hot, I'd probably come here to relax. The roof had the perfect spot to hang my hammock.

Reaching the door to the student council, I could feel the cold air from the room whispering out from under the door. It seemed even the president had no intention of withstanding the heat.

I knocked on the door, and waited, only for it to be opened by a purple-haired little soldier.

"You! What are you doing here? This is a special meeting room

dedicated to the power of the student council."

Tachibana Akane, the student council secretary, was the one to open the door. Before I could reply however, I heard a voice coming from inside the room.

"Let him in Tachibana, I invited him here."

At the sound of the presidents voice, she paled slightly, before jumping back into gear. "Yes, President!" she managed to squeak out, opening the door fully to let me in, while simultaneously shooting me a dirty look. I really had gotten on her bad side somehow.

Walking in, I found Manabu sitting at his desk, a pile of papers at his side. That, however, was the only similarity to how the room had been the last time I was here. Looking around, it was clear that some changes had been made over the break.

"You've redecorated," I noted. After considering how it looked and felt, I added "I don't like it."

"I'm not overly fond of it myself, but functionally it's an improvement." I suppose that was what mattered the most. An efficient student council was better than a flashy but useless one. "Please, take a seat."

Manabu had gestured to the seat at the nearby table, getting up from his desk and moving towards it himself. Following his lead, I took a seat opposite him, relaxing in the leather of the couch. Tachibana took up her position standing behind him, although from my sitting position I could barely see the top of her head from behind the couch.

It was cute, she was acting like a protective sibling to her big brother. I couldn't help but find it amusing.

"I was surprised to get your message."

"Yes, well I thought we had much to discuss. Tachibana, would you mind getting us some tea?" He directed the last question towards Tachibana.

"A-are you sure, President? I don't think I should leave you alone with this kouhai. He's got a nasty look on his face."

"I'll be fine, Tachibana. Please get us some tea." Manabu spoke as if he was tired of her overprotectiveness, but there was a sparkle in his eye, and instinctively I knew he was fond of their relationship, whatever it may be.

So, this was the weakness of the Student Council President.

After receiving his reassurances, the secretary jumped up, saluting him, and ran off towards the small kitchen in a side room. Once she was gone, Manabu turned back to me, a serious expression on his face.

"Thank you for coming, Ayanokouji. I didn't want to have to track

you to your dorm room."

"It's not a bother. I didn't have plans anyway."

The president gave me a searching look, trying to determine the validity of my words. The trouble was, most of my actions seemed sporadic, and there was no discernible pattern between when I had plans and when I didn't. He had no choice but to take my word, leaning back slightly in resignation.

While there was nothing wrong with not having plans, he was right to be suspicious. In his position at school, there was always a benefit to being his friend, always something people could gain from an interaction. Even though he had invited me, he was naturally cautious of what I expected to get out of this meeting.

But my goal was simply to pass the time.

"Would you care for another game of chess?" After I inclined my head slightly, he got up and made his way over to a nearby cabinet, pulling out a beautiful marble chess set. "I had the opportunity to meet Sakayanagi-san of Class 1-A over the break."

"Oh?" Of course I already knew this, but I wanted to know his opinion.

"A brilliant girl, far beyond myself. And her chess skills are near perfection."

"So I've heard."

He gave me a searching look, but I gave nothing away. "She recommended I play a game with you."

"I'm honoured to have her recommendation." That was no lie. Sakayanagi was brilliant, and I valued her opinion very highly. If she said someone was smart, or worth her time, then they probably were.

"I wasn't aware the two of you were close."

"We're not. I've never played against her once." This was something I would like to remedy in the near future. Chess was an enjoyable past time, especially against a strong opponent. "Although I'm surprised you keep track of things like that."

"It's the president's job to keep an eye on everyone, particularly the shining stars of each grade."

He wore a guarded expression with these words, and for good reason. While they weren't wrong, his actions went beyond that. There was no way he could keep an eye on students to that degree, particularly ones from another year level.

He would also be thinking about the relationship between Sakayanagi and I. I had given away the fact that we had never played chess before, yet she knew my capabilities already. It would be foolish for her to recommend me if she had no idea of my true talents, as that could reflect badly on her, so the possibility emerged

that we had a history prior to this school.

While we were speaking, and setting up the pieces on the chess board, Tachibana had returned with the tea, placing a teacup before Manabu, herself and I, and pouring the teapot out into the three cups.

"Thank you, Tachibana." She flushed a little at Manabu's kindness, before returning to her usual act of glaring at me.

"Are you sure this is safe for me to drink?" I questioned Manabu. I wouldn't put it past Tachibana to poison my drink.

"Wh-what an incredibly rude first-year student!" Tachibana stammered.

"Please, feel comfortable drinking it. We have no intention to poison you," Manabu sighed. It seemed that the overprotectiveness of the secretary could be too much even for him at times.

I took a cautious sip of the tea, before determining that if it was poisoned, there was no way for me to tell. Besides, I found it unlikely that she had managed to acquire poison on the school grounds.

Unless the short purplette had a past life as an assassin, I didn't think I had anything to fear.

"Shall we play?"

"Fine. I'm happy to have the black pieces." Normally, white held the advantage simply by the ability to move first, but in order to balance the game, I wanted to handicap myself with black. It would, at least, create a more equal game.

Before we could begin however, there was a knock on the door.

Manabu glanced at Tachibana, who quickly got up and went to the door. I was surprised that someone else was here, since there shouldn't have been a reason to meet with the council unannounced, and I didn't think that Manabu would have scheduled a meeting at the same time as mine.

But to my surprise, Tachibana opened the door to the bald ex-leader of Class A. Katsuragi was here to see the student council, with the gift I had seen him purchase the other day in his hand. And suddenly everything made sense.

"Pardon the intrusion. I didn't realise you had company."

"It's no trouble. I heard you stopped by yesterday. The day before as well. We were absent because the room was being renovated. I apologise." Manabu, ever the gracious man, accepted Katsuragi's intrusion.

"Oh no, it's quite all right. It's summer vacation. The fault is mine. However, I'm glad to meet with you today. I was afraid I'd have to go directly to your dormitory to find you. I came to you with a request."

"Very well. What is it you wanted to ask?" Surprisingly, Manabu didn't ask me to leave, or ask Katsuragi to come back another time. He seemed perfectly comfortable with allowing me to listen into what could potentially be a very personal matter."

Katsuragi too seemed surprised by this, giving me a suspicious look as he spoke. Clearly he hadn't expected an audience for his meeting. "If possible, I would prefer to do this in private," he requested, obviously inclining his head towards myself. In response, I took a sip of my tea, before answering his question.

"Don't concern yourself with my presence. It's already obvious that you intend to send a gift to your sister."

All three occupants of the room looked shocked at my deduction, particularly Katsuragi. It was unrealistic for a normal person to figure something like that out, so I wasn't surprised at their reactions.

"How did you..."

"It was just a guess but thank you for the confirmation. Yesterday, you purchased a gift from a popular store in the mall. I was there for the exact same reason and happened to see you. The easiest conclusion would be you intended to get it for someone in our grade, but the only upcoming birthdays are yours and Inogashira from my class, someone I'm confident you aren't close to.

"It's entirely possible that you intended it for an upperclassman, but in that case you wouldn't be here today. There's no reason to see the student council, particularly holding the gift in question, if you don't intend to do something questionable. Clearly you want to send it to someone outside of the school.

"I find it unlikely that you would be willing to violate the no contact rule unless it was absolutely necessary, meaning that they probably have no one else close to them but you. A single person alone then, someone you don't want to be forgotten on their birthday. The gift you have is distinctly feminine, so it becomes much more likely that it's either your mother or a sister. Considering that it's also your birthday, I'd favour the idea that it's your twin."

"Incredible..."

Even Manabu was impressed with my deductions. There were a few leaps in logic, but I was rather confident in my conclusion. Katsuragi's reaction was the final proof that I was correct.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you managed to deduce that. Once again, I must commend your ability to rationalise, Ayanokouji. But yes, I'd like to send a package and message to my family off-campus. Of course, I don't expect a reply"

He turned his attention back towards Manabu, asking the

important question, asking for permission for one-sided communication.

"Even if communication is one-sided, it's still not permitted," the president replied, in a very professional manner.

However, Katsuragi wouldn't have come to the student council room if he could be discouraged that easily. "I heard that the rules about cutting off contact don't apply to packages. Surely, if what is sent doesn't include any text, information, or communication, that wouldn't break the rules, would it?"

"The rules prohibit it. The restrictions exist for a reason. When the school was founded, the rules weren't quite as strict as they are now," Manabu explained. He looked at Secretary Tachibana and nodded.

"It's just as the president says. Originally, shipping a package would've been permitted. However, several students broke their promises. They hid letters in their packages without first seeking permission. So, such contact is now completely banned," she said.

I wasn't surprised that students had attempted this. Of course, whenever boundaries are set, people will always try to push them.

"And there you have it," added Manabu, dashing Katsuragi's hopes with complete and utter rejection.

Katsuragi wasn't ready to back down. He immediately reassessed the situation and composed himself.

"I must ask you once again. Please allow me to request direct shipping at the store itself. I will pay for the package to be sent to an address of my choosing, and nothing else. I won't even touch the item. Under those restrictions, there's no way for me to commit fraud."

"But that still violates the rules—"

"Violates the rules? This school is all about fostering one's abilities. I've heard that you can do anything, with enough points. You can buy test scores, or even trade with other students. Points have many uses. Am I wrong?" he asked.

"That makes things slightly different." Katsuragi's words changed Horikita's brother's attitude. "However, I must make one correction to your theory. The point system is not all-powerful. It's certainly possible to use points to buy test scores or barter with other students, but those things are never explicitly mentioned in the rules. The things that are explicitly prohibited can't be easily altered using points. Without the school's permission, it's just impossible," Manabu explained.

"Well, that's odd. If that's true, the rules are full of holes."

"There's nothing odd. The school purposefully made rules that allow for loopholes," Manabu responded immediately, as if this

were easy to understand.

Of course, there was a loophole in this rule as well, but Katsuragi didn't seem to notice it. The difference between the ex-leader of Class 1-A and the third-year president was stark.

"So, you're saying that there's nothing I can do?" asked Katsuragi.

"Correct. If school rules forbid something, you cannot circumvent them, even with points."

Katsuragi had probably been prepared to spend a large sum, but this looked like the end of the line.

"If you're finished, please leave."

"I see. I understand. Well then, if you'll please excuse me."

He gave me a nod, before bowing and quickly left the room. Once he was gone, Manabu returned his attention to me, and the unplayed chess game before us. During the conversation, I had slowly been drinking my tea, and so before we resumed our conversation, I refilled my cup, and took another sip of the delicious drink Tachibana had provided us.

"I apologise for the interruption."

"Being the president must be very busy," I noted.

"Indeed. Now, would you mind?" Manabu made a move, starting with the queens pawn, before gesturing to me to play.

I responded with the Indian's defence, Nf6, something I had been experimenting with against computers in my spare time. D4 games were my favourite positions, as they favour slow positional games, instead of the aggressive positions that came from 1.e4.

"I heard about the results of the island. Very impressive." The president played c4, but my mind was already away from the game in front of me, contemplating where this conversation was going.

"I'm surprised you have that much pull."

"You should be careful, Ayanokouji. I may be the only one who knows the details of the exam, but the class points are public knowledge. Eyes are turning to your class already, it's unheard of for Class D to perform so well in both exams."

I hadn't been aware that other grades could see our points, but it wasn't a huge surprise. Cross-grade friendships weren't a problem, and rumours would start to spread through the upper years. It seemed I would have to be on guard sooner than I thought.

"Is there anything in particular you're worried about? All of this could have been said over the phone."

"I received a report that my sister was injured. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?" I couldn't be sure how much the president had been told, or what the school even knew. Honestly was the best strategy here, after a delayal.

"I'm surprised you care. I thought you were happy to let her walk

her own path to failure."

"That may be true, but she is still my sister. While I'm not going to assist her in any way, I'm still interested in her safety." I wasn't sure how much of that was garbage.

"It was always the plan to have her retire out of injury. The situation got out of hand." It wasn't wrong, just an abridged version of the story.

"I see."

The game continued in a comfortable silence, until eventually Manabu blundered a six-move sequence and lost his white-square bishop, a death sentence in the Catalan.

"It's my loss. There's no sense continuing this game." A gracious resignation. It would be demeaning for him to insist on continued play down a piece, an action tantamount to suggesting he expected me to blunder worse than that.

"It was a good game. It's not often I have to focus so heavily." It hadn't been overly challenging, but Manabu was certainly far better than the average player.

"You and Sakayanagi are both exceptionally talented. I wouldn't want to pick between the two of you the better player."

I was confident I was better than Sakayanagi, but for someone who simply wasn't on our level, it was difficult to tell the difference. The disparity in our skill was minute I assumed, based on Manabu's words, but it was impossible for someone to tell apart two players far beyond the observer.

"I'm sure I'll have the opportunity to play her at some point."

It had been a good way to spend time avoiding the heat, but I was sure there was more to this meeting. Manabu wasn't one to waste time pointlessly.

"Join the student council."

I hadn't been expecting that.

Tachibana's eyes widened in shock. "P-President?" she stammered. "There's no need for this delinquent to be on the student council."

"On the contrary, I've determined him to be completely qualified for the position of Vice President."

That was an even bigger responsibility than I had expected. It was strange for the president to be offering such an important role to a first year, let alone such a controversial one as myself.

"N-no, no no no, President! That's impossible...! There's no way Nagumo-kun would permit something like that," Secretary Tachibana interjected.

Oh. Tachibana's slip made the situation much clearer.

"I have to turn down your offer—

"And on top of that he just refuses!" wailed Tachibana.

"For now." I finished. Taking a place on the student council right now would be detrimental to my position in the grade.

"So you might reconsider in the future then?" Manabu inquired.

"It's not out of the question. There are certainly a lot of benefits of being on the Student Council, and you seem to have a huge amount of power." I couldn't immediately reject the offer. The position was an enviable one, for good reason. The only downsides right now were the attention it would bring.

"I must correct one misconception you have. The student council itself has no power. The abilities of the person seated at the top are paramount."

He was basically complimenting himself, although it wasn't unwarranted. What he meant was that the student council was only as capable as the students on it. They wouldn't be given unlimited opportunities and resources, but a student who could use what they were given properly was what gave it power.

"I'm surprised you're asking me for this. There are plenty of other capable students in my grade."

Manabu didn't answer immediately, instead leaning back in his chair pondering how to answer.

"I don't know that this is for me to say, but starting next year, the school will change dramatically. Not for the better. When the time comes, I'll need the power to combat that change. It might already be too late. The need grows stronger every day."

"President, you're talking about what'll happen when Nagumo-kun is elected president, right? I can't imagine he'd change the school that much for the worse," Tachibana said.

"You clearly haven't been listening to the school Tachibana." She glared at my impudence, but I continued. "Nagumo is powerful and dangerous. I can see why you would want to put a stop to him"

"Actually, Ayanokouji, you weren't my first choice."

"Oh?" That was unexpected.

"I would have preferred Ichinose to take my place. She's competent enough, and has the right attitude, but Nagumo sank his claws into her too quickly."

That was something I had noticed as well. Ichinose had very quickly become Nagumo's pet, a development I wasn't happy with.

"I've been doing my best to disillusion her of him."

"I'm well aware. You've been making good progress, but I don't believe it's enough. Out of the other students in your grade, I would be loath to put Ryuuen into power, and Sakayanagi already turned me down, citing her disability, although I don't believe that for a second"

It struck me as strange too, that Sakayanagi would turn down the

vice president position. I had no clue to her reasons, but I suppose that didn't matter right now.

"What about the second years? Surely they can't all be controlled by him." That seemed unrealistic, even for someone as capable as Nagumo.

"No, there are certainly students who haven't given into him yet, but none of them are capable of restricting him."

"And so you're left with me." It seemed I was the result of a process of elimination.

"I'm going to be frank, Ayanokouji. I don't trust you. You're a dangerous unknown, and I'm reluctant to give you this opportunity."

I took another sip of tea. "Are you that concerned about Nagumo?"

"Consider it the lesser of two evils. Nagumo will change the school drastically for the worse, and you're the only person I think is capable of stopping him."

This conversation had quickly become very serious. Manabu was discussing the fate of the school without him, how it would look within a year, or even less. And despite his lack of trust in me, his suspicions about my actions and goals, he still found me a more desirable alternative to Nagumo.

"Do you really think I have any interest in stopping him? Nagumo could make this school much more interesting."

"I think you will. Nagumo never got over the slight at being placed in Class B. He wants to make this school into a meritocracy, where class placement doesn't matter. At the very least, I think you still believe in the class competition."

Based on the results from the exams, that was clear. I was enjoying the competition. A meritocratic school would end up being very boring, having no competition. The handicap from having to manipulate an entire class made life much more interesting.

"As expected, the President understands the situation. I won't become the Vice President, at least not yet, but I will work to hinder Nagumo. You're right in us having a common enemy."

"I'm glad to hear that we are on the same page. You might not care, but I worry about the state of the school once I'm gone. I've put a lot of work in, and it would be a shame to see the foundations of this institute torn down."

That at least, I agreed with. It would be a shame to see this school destroyed in the way Nagumo wanted it to be. Individual competition was so common, it was a breath of fresh air for the first time in my life to be competing as a group.

Recognising that was all Manabu had to discuss with me, I got up

and prepared to leave. An entire hour had flown by while I was here, and the heat of the day should have somewhat subsided.

Before I left however, I turned back to Manabu, curious for his opinion.

"You didn't tell Katsuragi it was possible to send a package."

"That would be against the school rules." As expected Manabu avoided answering the question.

"You yourself have proven that as long as the school doesn't know, it's possible to get away with anything. It would have been easy for you to send his package."

"Unfortunately for Katsuragi, he didn't realise this. Besides, you didn't mention it either."

"I suppose I didn't."

I had no intention of getting mixed up with Katsuragi's gift, an incident which could potentially get me expelled. His sister would simply have to go without, or he would have to find another way of sending it.

"Good luck next semester, Ayanokouji. I can't tell you anything but be careful."

It seemed school was going to become much more interesting. As I left the school and headed back to my dorm, I pondered the conversation I had just had.

Nagumo was a concern, both for the President and myself. I wasn't overly worried about his changes to the school, since a meritocracy wouldn't have any threat to my presence here, but the fact that other grades had heard about our results was worrisome. Nagumo had made it very clear that he wanted to challenge me, as someone he found interesting, through his insecure desire to prove his own superiority. And Manabu was confident this would happen sooner rather than later.

I guess I'll just wait and find out.

Authors Notes:

So, a bit less fun than the last chapter, some serious content. In the LN Manabu has a very high opinion of Ayanokouji, something not shared in this fic. If Ichinose can figure out there was something sus with the trial, then Manabu definitely can. He simply is going with the least worse option.

Poor Katsuragi sister isn't getting a present, at least not with Ayanokouji's help. It seems too risky for him, especially since he has no reason to help out. He's not as close to Sudou, and hence doesn't know about the basketball tournament, or whatever.

In regards to the first part of the chapter on Atlas Shrugged. I finally got a chance to read it, and i would tentatively recommend

it. Firstly, it's by no means an easy book to read. it isn't a light novel you can cruise through quickly, it does take some effort to read. That said, I quite enjoyed it. I wanted to explore Ayanokouji's opinion on it, and eventually that just derailed into a philosophical debate with himself, which was also super fun to write.

A warning to anyone who is starting to read more advanced or complex books, with basis in political or psychological theory: remember that they are books. It's very easy to get caught up in the message of the story, like in this one, and forget that the author has an objective, they have a bias, and the novel is designed to make an argument. 1984, for example, is designed to show totalitarianism in a negative light. I'm not saying i think it's good, but you need to remember that everything has a bias. There are quite a few younger readers on this site who might be getting more into advanced or complex books, and this is an important thing to keep in mind. It's fine to enjoy books, especially ones that present a theory, but they need to be viewed through an objective lens. Not saying don't read stuff, just be cautious the further down the rabbit hole you go.

Atlas Shrugged presents ideas that I somewhat subscribe to but many people would consider quite radical. Everyone has a different opinion, and just because something is printed and published doesn't mean what it says is an absolute truth.

Just some advice I've picked up from years of reading a lot. As a bookworm i was always reading stuff, and got to books like this at a much younger age than most people, and admittedly, that did affect my understanding of the world.

DON'T ABSORB BOOK THEORIES LIKE PERSONALITIES IT FUCKS YOU UP. A warning from experience. Read lots of books, from a wide range of media and political standing if you do, don't stick to one concept, but be critical. That's the best advice i can give.

That said, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 5 Chapter 3 - Scalpers

It was late in the afternoon when I received a message from Manabu. We hadn't spoken since our meeting two days ago, so I was surprised to see he was communicating with me. I had assumed that we had exhausted all topics of conversation, but it turned out to be nothing of the sort.

Putting down my book, I unlocked my phone only to find a warning from him. Why he had bothered to tell me I wasn't sure, but this was the last time he would ever tell me secrets ahead of time. I would have to make this opportunity count.

Apparently, the water system to the dormitory would be shut off from 6pm tonight, due to planned maintenance at the water department. There was no strict schedule, but the repair work was estimated to not be finished until at least early tomorrow morning. Until then, students would have to suffice off of vending machines and free water handed out at the cafeteria.

The convenience stores were unavailable, as was Keyaki mall. It seemed almost the entire school would be shut down during this incident. It would be a tough night for the school to get through, and there would likely be some students going without water until tomorrow.

What was his purpose in telling me this? I was surprised the school hadn't given everyone a heads up, but that would probably happen when the water was actually shut off. They probably wanted to avoid a panic, and make sure they had supplies organised to get through this. But why was I told?

Was it a test? Perhaps. It was possible Manabu was trying to see what I would do with insider information, and how I would help the school. I shrugged. In the end it didn't matter. He would think what he did, and I would do what I do. His opinion of me mattered very little. He might be the Student Council President, but in the end, he was still a third year who had to carefully toe the line. For all intents and purposes, I was almost completely beyond his reach.

I realised I had spent far too long pondering the consequences of this plan. What would happen would happen, and the benefits far outweighed the consequences. At worst, I would lose whatever I gained, but even that seemed unlikely.

This was a situation I couldn't squander, as it would probably

never come around again. A little over 400 students wouldn't have access to water for the next 12 hours. There was only one person to call, only one person who would be insane enough to help out.

I picked up my phone once again and called Kiryuuin Fuuka.

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"It's been far too long, kouhai-kun. Don't tell me you forgot about Fuuka-chan?"

I found my potential partner in crime lounging on a bench outside the second-year dorms, terrifying grin plastered on her face as usual.

"Hardly. I've simply been busy with exams."

"Oh yes, so I've heard." She leaned forward, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "So, tell me, how did you do it? The miracle of Class 1-D is all anyone is talking about."

"The miracle, huh?" It seemed the rumours had gone beyond what Manabu hinted at. While the results were known, only a few students in the first years would have known enough details to fully explain, and most of them weren't likely to interact with upperclassmen for gossip. I suppose in that sense, it would seem like a miraculous victory.

"Despite overwhelming odds, the belief of even the universe against them, Class 1-D rose up and did the impossible, crushing every single class before them with ease!" Kiryuuin acted out our story with dramatic flair most would only dream to possess. It wasn't far from the truth surprisingly, even though the story seemed embellished for drama. The allure of a school story like this, a mystery to be proud of was something not many would ignore. Every school had their own culture and proud rumours, but so far this school was still too young to have that. My class had finally provided such a legacy.

The one Class D to ever do well, seemingly without explanation.

"Every single grade does the Island Exam and the Zodiac Exam. Everything else changes year by year, but those two are consistent," Kiryuuen continued. "Which means that everyone in the second and third year knows what it takes to win, and knows the margins you pulled should be impossible even for Class A."

"Then your grades are simply lesser." Every class in my grade had at least one talent leading them, who if unhindered by the other three class leader could easily have pulled off the margin of victory I did. Ryuuen nearly did on the island, even with the rest of us involved. If none of the other grades thought it was possible, then there simply wasn't enough competition or talent in them.

"Ah, you see what I see then kouhai-kun. There's no one interesting in my grade at all, not even Nagumo. They're all little

babies, rolling over for him because they're too scared to fight back."

"Does that include you?"

"Ha, I simply lack an interest. My class does not deserve to graduate from Class A, not after the pathetic resistance they showed." And it was clear that Kiryuuen herself had no need to graduate. She was talented enough to get whatever she wanted with her own merit. The 100% employment was of no benefit to her.

I sighed. "I'll tell you about it later, but for now we've got work to do."

"Ah, you're no fun, kouhai-kun." She stretched in a very catlike manner, before somehow managing to be graceful as she got up from a park bench. "What insanity am I joining you with this time."

I began to walk to our nearby destination, with Kiryuuin following at my side. "Hopefully a very profitable one. At least, it should cause some chaos tonight."

"Oh? Now you most certainly have my attention." There was a dangerous gleam in Kiryuuin's eyes, one I had only seen a few times, each event preceding one of her terrible plans.

"I didn't have it before?"

She waved off my question. "Semantics. Just tell me what you're planning."

It hadn't taken long to reach the cafeteria. It was positioned to be close to most of the student areas, accessible quickly from the school and dorms. It wasn't so helpful if you were on the other side of the massive campus, but there was little reason for students to explore that far.

There was no one around, and so we snuck around to the back unnoticed, easily avoiding the blind spots in the security cameras. It hadn't taken long to find them, and once again, it was as if the school had purposefully created them. There was a clear and simple path to follow, if one found it, to move around the entire school without being seen. Obviously, the school expected rule-breaking activities to occur.

Out of my pocket I pulled a security card and used it to unlock the back door. Moving silently, I cracked the door open slightly and peered in, with Kiryuuin looking over my shoulder.

This was the storage room for the cafeteria, and it seemed my hunch had been correct. Ignoring the various foods lining the shelves, my eyes instantly focused on the target of this operation.

There wasn't anyone around, so I quickly snuck into the room, and once Kiryuuin had followed me I quietly let the door shut. It wouldn't do to have a random student come along and find the door open, unlikely as that might be.

"Care to explain how you obtained such a fabulous tool?" Kiryuuen asked, indicating towards the key card in my hand.

"Later. First, we have to get this out of here."

"Ooo, another heist. You never fail to bring excitement to my life, kouhai-kun."

Kiryuuin laughed, before moving over to the thing in question. Grabbing the handles, she might have appeared to have a weak and dainty body of a woman, but there was a definitive strength to her arms, giving her no trouble to lift and manoeuvre the pallet jack back out the door, and slowly through the path of blind spots.

I stayed behind for a moment to ensure there was no evidence of us being here. The room surprisingly had no camera, and after wiping any fingerprints off of the surfaces we had touched, I followed Kiryuuin back out of the room, locking the door again with the key car.

Eventually though, we made our way to the back of the dorms where Kiryuuin dropped the pallet on the ground.

"I assume you want an explanation?"

"As fun as this was, I assume there is a greater purpose behind our profligacy."

In response to her question, I simply handed Kiryuuin my phone, specifically the message from the president. It took her a moment to read and process, but once she had she began to laugh.

"Hahaha kouhai-kun you really are terrible. To exploit such a moment, one would consider you heartless."

What Kiryuuin was referring to was the pallet we had just stolen from the cafeteria. One pallet, containing 300 2L water bottles, the entire supply the school had prepared for this emergency.

"I see it as simple business. Supply and demand. We now control a resource that no one else does."

"And the vending machines? They also sell water." Kiryuuin brought up an important point, but I had already dealt with that.

"Within a 10-minute walking distance there are four vending machines, but only one sells water. Unfortunately, I tripped and spilt my drink over the controls in my hurry to meet you. I'm pretty sure it doesn't work anymore."

If anyone was dedicated enough to walk the distance to get their own water bottle from another vending machine, then they deserved the discounted price.

"This is a crazy plan, even for you. You seriously think you can take the school hostage?"

"What are you talking about?" I replied innocently. "People can survive 12 hours without water easily. It's their choice to buy from us. We just happen to control the only supply."

I wondered if there would even be any negative repercussions from the school. There was no evidence that we had been the ones to take the water, and there was no rule saying you can't sell anything for a much higher value that it was worth.

The only concern came if we were asked how we acquired the water, since there was no record of purchasing it. The obvious explanation is that we took it, but we could simply claim that we found it outside the back of the cafeteria, left out there by someone lazy. After all, no student had access to the storage room.

"Fine, I guess I'll honour you with my assistance." Kiryuuin gave me a cocky grin. "What's the plan, boss?"

I could already tell her attitude was going to get on my nerves tonight. I looked at my phone for the time, only to find it was already almost 6pm. The day had gotten away from me rather quickly.

"It won't be long before the water is shut off. Honestly, I'm surprised the school has held off this long telling people, but at 6pm at the latest they'll announce the news.

"Assuming they have no backup source of water, since they probably didn't expect to lose 600L in a few hours, there won't be any water for students to access. That's not a big problem, but with the idiots in this school, plenty will panic.

"I can spread rumours in my grade that I've got some to sell. 1000 points for a bottle, doubling every hour. That should incentivise people to cough up points quickly. I need you to do the same in the second and third years."

The more I spoke, the wider Kiryuuin's grin got, until it couldn't stretch any further. "You truly are despicable, kouhai-kun. I assume we'll be splitting the profits?"

"Naturally. I don't really care about the points, but it would be a waste to let the water go for free."

Kiryuuin leaned back against the wall of the dorms, arms folded and staring at me in a predatory manner that scared even me slightly. "You never do things by half measures. Ah, to think how boring life here was before you showed up."

I began to unload the water packets, ignoring the poetry falling from Kiryuuin's mouth. As expected, she made no move to help me, having already participated with her labour quotient today by moving the pallet out here.

"I still don't see why you needed my help though. Unless perhaps you missed me?" Kiryuuin once again made a futile attempt to tease me. "Aw, how sweet. I'm flattered kouhai-kun. Yes, I will go on a date with you."

"I'd probably be more receptive to such an offer if you helped

move these bottles of water."

"A shame then. I guess you won't have the honour of getting a kiss from me."

I continued to ignore her words, and it wasn't long before the pallet was completely empty. Leaving the bottles with Kiryuuin to stand guard, I went for a brief walk, dragging the pallet and jack with me, before pushing them off the edge of the campus, into the ocean where it wouldn't be found. This school had a very convenient means for disposing of evidence.

As I returned to where Kiryuuin was with the water, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket with a notification from the school, a distinctly different vibration to a regular notification. Taking it out I saw the message I had been waiting for. The entire school now knew about the water shortage.

I got back to the water to find Kiryuuin staring at her phone, a grin of anticipation that matched exactly how I felt.

"I need you here to help me out. I can't run this operation myself."

"Of course. I suppose you want me to inform my grade about our little shop now?" As expected, Kiryuuin was on point.

"Yes. 1000 points, doubling every hour. And it's a shame that we have no clear idea when the water will come back."

As she complied with her part of the plan, I did my part by sending the information to Kikyou and Karuizawa, who were well suited to spreading it around. It wouldn't be long before people began to show up.

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It hadn't been long since the announcement went out when the first students turned up.

I hadn't expected anyone to be here so early, and it seemed neither had Kiryuuin, based on the shocked expression on her face, and with good reason.

The school had announced at 6pm that the water was shut off, probably until tomorrow morning. There would be free water available at the cafeteria only, or you could purchase it from the vending machines.

Most students would follow standard logic. 'It's only a few hours, I can hold out'. They would last a while, perhaps an hour or two, before the need for water grew. Once that occurred, they would then head to the cafeteria, only to find that there wasn't any water.

As an alternative, a few minutes after the announcement a rumour had sprung up amongst the first and second years, that water was available for sale as an alternative, for a low price that would increase over time. IT was a blatantly obvious attempt to scam people, and it seemed reasonable to assume that most people

would brush it off as nothing to worry about.

Which was why it went against all logical reasoning to see Sakayanagi and Kamuro walking up to us only 20 minutes past six.

"Fufufu it seems we are the first customers. Don't you feel blessed, Masumi-san?"

"I don't understand why we're here. Surely we can get through the next few hours without forking over points to this loser."

The two were acting out their usual play, to the befuddlement of Kiryuuin.

"I've absolutely no idea how you two found out about this so quickly."

My two sources were in Class D, and the next most connected class was Class B. There should have been no way for Sakayanagi to find us so quickly, and yet here she was.

"I, unlike most of my peers, am capable of taking advantage of an opportunity. Your rumour spread very quickly, Ayanokouji-kun."

Kiryuuin had quickly perked up upon hearing our conversation. Her ability to correctly discern someone's capabilities was once again on display.

"You must be the famous Sakayanagi."

"Ah, Kiryuuin Fuuka. The laziest person in the school."

"I prefer the term disinterested if it's all the same to you."

The two of them were smiling devilishly at each other, as if they had found a new toy to play with. Kamuro in response took the opportunity to step away slightly from the metaphorical lightening.

"I must admit it's an impressive scheme you've set up in such a short amount of time. The teachers at the cafeteria are most confused by the disappearance of water. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?"

As expected Sakayanagi had instantly seen right through our plan, although she seemed to take more amusement out of it than anything. I didn't sense any malice in the question, simply curiosity. She probably was looking forward to the result much more than using it as a chance to discredit me.

"I've got no idea. It's very impressive for them to lose that much water."

Sakayanagi hummed amusedly at my response. "Indeed. In any case, Masumi-san and I would like to purchase three bottles of water."

"It's one bottle per person. We need to distribute it to everyone of course."

"Three bottles and I suggest this deal to all my classmates."

"Done."

Sakayanagi transferred me 3000 points, and in return made

Kamuro pick up three bottles of water. It was an impressive feat, but she seemed to be managing to hold 6L of water rather easily.

I hadn't expected Sakayanagi to back down, in fact I had been counting on it. Class A was somewhat untouchable to my rumours even if they reached them, and the recommendation from a third party would go a long way to making this more profitable.

"A pleasure doing business with you Ayanokouji-kun. Come Masumi, it seems we can finally flush the toilet."

I didn't want to know what was going on with that, and simply watched in silence as they slowly wandered away.

"What a fascinating individual."

I couldn't agree more with Kiryuuin's words.

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Business had been progressing smoothly all night. Thanks to Sakayanagi's recommendation, a few more members of Class A turned up, and surprisingly a large number of Class D students from all grades were the ones to show up in the first hour. Only 22 bottles were sold then, as the reality of the situation hadn't quite sunk in yet, but it was in the second hour, at the 2000-point price mark, that things became interesting.

Someone had taken ours and the schools vague wording on when the water would be back and suggested we could have no water for days. The concern spread like wildfire throughout the school, and suddenly as the only place with any water available, we were flooded with customers, a line forming around the corner.

Even Manabu showed up at that point, paying 2000 points for a bottle of water. He made no comment, but I could see in his eyes that he was enjoying the situation. Apparently, while he might not be able to say out loud that he approved, he found my plan amusing. Perhaps he wouldn't cut off my information after all.

Nagumo was much of the same, making his purchase at 4000 into quite the scene, milking it for everything it was worth. He clearly found our antics amusing, as someone taking advantage of a situation and the people around them. In his ideal meritocracy, it was the strong devouring the weak, and we had simply applied the same concept to supply and demand, although both were artificially manipulated to our advantage.

Some people, namely Ryuuen and his cronies, tried to make a scene and claim the water for themselves, but it seemed that the people in line had our backs. Surprisingly, they valued our way of sharing it out, one per person, and wouldn't allow anyone to disrupt the system. It was incredible to watch the people we were scamming defend the system, and Ryuuen didn't seem to believe what he was watching either, awestruck by the stupidity of most

students.

This continued for hours, and while a few teachers came over to see what was happening, they didn't stop us, something I was grateful for. This was turning into a very profitable night.

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There were only a few bottles of water left, and since the price had now reached 64,000 points per bottle, I didn't think anyone would show up any longer. It was an absurd amount to spend for some water, and there shouldn't be any reason for people to buy it now.

Kiryuuin had been coming to the same realisation for a while now, and finally picked herself up from the chair she'd been sitting in for the past few hours. It had materialised at some point without my knowledge. I had no idea how she had obtained it, but it was clearly comfortable, and she had taken great pleasure in spinning around it just to tease me.

"Well, that was a rather profitable venture."

"I'm honestly surprised that so many students turned up. Really, I thought the students in this school were smarter than that, but apparently they're incapable of rationing water." Quite a few students had come back through the night, somehow having used 2L of water in just a few hours.

"The rumours that the water wouldn't be back for a few days definitely helped. Even back on the island I've never seen so many students worried about water." Kiryuuin smirked, remembering back to when some of her classmates had shown up, begging pitifully for a discount. Of course, she had brutally refused them, even having the audacity to charge them extra as an apology.

"Thanks for your help. It made organising everyone much easier." I wasn't simply giving out compliments. Kiryuuin gave off a very intimidating aura, one that made any troublemakers think twice before stepping out of line. The few incidents that occurred didn't even need me getting involved.

"I quite enjoyed the experimental aspect. To think that it would be Class D students who were willing to give up their pride first."

"They didn't have points to waste, in any grade, which made swallowing their pride that much easier. The Class A and B students where the losers here. So confident they could hold out that when they eventually broke, they were even worse than the supposedly lesser students."

It was a trend that had continued throughout the night. Of course, there were outliers like Sakayanagi, but the majority of students from the higher ranked classes were the ones coming here last, being forced to swallow their pride later.

"I'll leave you to clean up then, kouhai-kun. Send me my points and I might treat you to something as thanks."

"I'll look forward to it then." Whatever she was planning was undoubtedly ridiculous, but it was a nice break from normalcy.

She made a move to leave, but before she had gone even a few steps, Kiryuuin turned to face me once again. "You never did explain how you got the key card."

I sighed. I'd hope she would drop it, but it seemed to be something very important.

"I had an altercation a few days ago in a store with a classmate. When the mall security came to take him away, I swiped one of their cards."

"Hahaha to think the school's great plan for free water would be undone by incompetent security. As always, you amaze me." Kiryuuin cackled to herself, very much enjoying the situation.

"Come to think of it, I never did find out what happened to him. There was no way he had enough points to pay for the damages," I thought out loud. Yamauchi surely should have gotten into more trouble, but it seemed nothing came of the incident.

A thoughtful look grew on the face of my conspirator. "You wouldn't be talking about an idiotic moron from your class, would you? Ugliest little gremlin to ever walk the earth?"

"That's the one."

Kiryuuin threw her head back in laughter this time. Apparently, the situation was far more amusing than I had known. "I actually did hear about this. Funnially enough, all his debts and punishments were dealt with by one Notice Me Senpai, out of the goodness of his heart."

Oh. That would explain a lot.

"So he's Nagumo's spy."

"That seems to be the case. What are you going to do about this little hiccup?" Kiryuuin was greatly amused by the situation.

"Absolutely nothing. He may not realise it, but Nagumo has inadvertedly invested his efforts into the most incompetent and useless being to ever enter the school. Honestly, Yamauchi is more likely to accidently help me by following his orders."

Surely Nagumo couldn't have made such a mistake. It wouldn't have taken much investigation, even just a conversation, to know how pointless he was as a spy. Either Nagumo was an incredibly bad judge of character, or he simply had the points to spare.

Before we could continue our conversation any longer, however, a figure made her way around the corner of the building and over to us.

"Oh? Another potential customer has arrived. Unfortunately,

you're several hours too late. The price for one bottle currently stands at 64,000 points." I could see Kiryuuin was going to take great pleasure in tormenting our latest victim, and as soon as I saw who it was, I had no intention of stopping her.

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't have that many points. I just need a small amount of water to get this bottle off of my arm."

Horikita had somehow gotten her hand stuck inside a water bottle. She was doing well to hold her usual superior attitude together, but I could see it was close to breaking.

"Ha, you expect us to make exceptions? Either purchase the bottle or leave. You're not worth my time."

I could see a single tear form in Horikita's eye at this. I could only guess at the amount of distress, embarrassment or even pain she had been going through for the last few hours. In any case, I took a bit of pity on her.

As she was turning to walk away, I called out to her. She turned to face me upon hearing her name, obviously sick and tired of whatever ordeal she had been going through.

I wasn't going to give her water, but I could give her some information. "The water should be back on in a few hours."

"So the rumour that it could be off for days—

"In the end, we can't really confirm anything. It just depends on how much people believed what they heard."

Neither of us had ever outright stated that the water would be off for any period of time. Anything we had said of course was speculation. Horikita's gaze hardened at our words.

"You two really are horrible."

"It's nothing personal, girl," Kiryuuin grinned. "It's just good business."

All she got in return was a grumpy 'hmph', before Horikita turned and followed the path she had just walked back to the dorms, doing her best to cover her arm.

"To think that's the president's little sister. I can never get over the difference."

"She's certainly fallen short of Manabu." I grabbed one of the remaining bottles and handed it to Kiryuuin. "For a job well done." We had kept a few aside for ourselves, but it seemed we wouldn't be selling out tonight.

"How gracious. And my points?" We had agreed to a 50-50 split after all.

"I'll send you all 472,000 points tomorrow."

"To think we made almost 1 million points in a few hours, with technically infinite profit margins. You truly are heartless."

"Yes, I promise to call you for my next business deal as well." I

managed to read the message in her words. For that little effort, Kiryuuin had no reserves to sitting out.

"Farewell, kouhai-kun. I'm sure you'll be seeing Fuuka-chan around."

"Goodnight Kiryuuin." I still refused to call her by that name.

Having said her farewells, Kiryuuin walked away, heading towards the second-year dorms. It was only once she was gone that I realised I had been left with 10L of water, and an extremely expensive leather spinning chair.

Damn that woman.

Authors Notes:

This chapter was a lot of fun. Return of Kiryuuin, so yay. Don't expect to see her often. She's in a different grade, meaning it's difficult to pull her into the story, but this was a fun little scam to run.

Is it unrealistic? Absolutely, there's no way teachers would let them get away with it, but i ignored that for fun.

Addressed the issue with Yamauchi. It was something I had been meaning to do last chapter, but the length and content got away from me so i put it in here.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 5 Chapter 4 - Definitely Not a Date Part 1

Later on, far off into the distant future I would look back on tonight as a turning point in my time here at school. A pivotal moment, one of the foundational moments of my choices. It was tonight that my relationship with Kikyou was redefined, my resolve was hardened, and my goals were set in stone.

But mostly I remember it for the pain in my ear as a result of asking an apparently stupid suggestion.

"Do you want to go out for dinner?"

The resulting yell across the phone forced me to hold it away from my head, as I did my best to get over the ringing in my head.

"I'm sorry could you repeat that? I didn't hear a word you said."

My next sentence resulted in another bout of shouting, one that I could at least partially distinguish through the volume.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! Asking a question like that and then ignoring me! Listen you bitch, do you have any idea what sort of thing you said, and you have the audacity to ignore my response?! Fucking asshole!"

I hadn't expected a reaction this severe.

"Are you OK?"

"It's been," she almost growled, "a really long day! So, I'm sorry for reacting appropriately to a stupid fucking question."

I sighed. "Look, I'm sorry for not understanding."

"And?"

"And for ignoring your response." Although that was her fault for screaming so loudly.

"Yay Kiyotaka! That wasn't so hard, was it?" Instantly all traces of anger had disappeared from her voice, a cheery and happy girl returning in a moment. I felt an involuntary shiver run down my spine in fear of such a demon.

Moving on from that terrifying exchange, I repeated the original question.

"Hmm, I have nothing planned for tonight, so I was probably going to come over anyway. Sure! I'd love to go have dinner with you Kiyotaka." I could feel the smile in her voice over the phone. It

was a very rare occurrence, so it still shocked me whenever Kikyou was genuinely happy, without putting on her façade, and this was one of those times.

"Great. Meet me at the entrance to the dorms at 6." It was a bit before five now, so that gave her plenty of time to get ready. I had picked up enough to know that girls could need an extraordinary amount of time to prepare for an outing.

"Oh? I thought you, mister practical, would just want to meet there." A suggestive tone entered her voice. "Don't tell me you want to walk there with me, ne Kiyotaka?"

"I suppose that's somewhat the case. Make sure to wear something nice." The place I had in mind wasn't especially cheap, and required more than just a t-shirt and jeans, although I had no doubt that Kikyou would have worn appropriate clothes anyway.

"A-Are you asking me out on a date?"

I was about to respond, before doing a double take at what I heard. It was almost imperceptible over the lower quality phone call, but she had definitely stumbled over her words slightly. For what reason, be it embarrassment, anticipation or something completely different I couldn't tell.

"Eh?"

"Well, nice clothes implies a fancy restaurant, walking me there yourself. It kinda gives off that vibe doesn't it?"

I spent a second trying to figure out the best way to respond.

"Back on the island, I promised I'd buy you dinner, didn't I? I wasn't really thinking of this as a date, just dinner with a friend."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Oh. Well, yeah, you did! I'm looking forward to our not-date, Kiyotaka!" She just had to go and call it that.

"I'll see you at six then."

"Don't be late~" She finished in a sing-song voice, before hanging up to go get ready.

Having confirmed our dinner, I flopped down onto my bed, trying to process that strange conversation. There was still an hour until 6, and it wouldn't take too long to shower and get dressed, so I had some time to relax and think.

No part of that phone call had gone to plan. While in the end the main goal was achieved, there were a lot more questions than answers generated by it.

The relationship between Kikyou and I was in a peculiar state. We had grown very close since the cruise, where she opened up to me, and now I wasn't sure how she felt.

Before this, I had always had a pretty good grasp of who I was to Kikyou, of how she thought of me. When she hated me, when she

stopped hating me, when she began to tolerate me to when she began to actively seek me out, I was able to accurately determine all of this.

Now, it was more complex.

I was confident in giving her the label of my best friend, an easy decision since she was practically my only friend, at least the only one I saw on a regular basis. She was the only person in the school I trusted, and at this point the only person I'd be willing to help out of goodwill.

But I had no idea what she thought of me. Or at least how deep our relationship was to her.

She had reacted in an unexpected way. There was the over the top reaction to my question, which I assumed came from a place of embarrassment. Looking back, I could understand the misconception, the double meaning behind my question if viewed from a more romantic light. Except for the key words 'romantic light'. It would only make sense to react in that manner if she was already considering out conversation, or me, in a less platonic manner.

Then there was the slight disappointment when I clarified that it wasn't a date, when I made it clear that I wanted to go out with a friend. Perhaps it was embarrassment or awkwardness at the question and response, but I suspected otherwise.

I was confident that was disappointment in her voice, however slight, and no matter how well she cheered up and continued the conversation it had been noticed by both of us.

Did she want to go on a date? It was possible. I wouldn't be surprised if her feelings had turned in that direction, in fact I thought it was a reasonable probability. I just didn't expect it to happen this soon.

If it turned out Kikyou had feelings for me, I probably wouldn't say no. She was certainly attractive, and I enjoyed spending time with her. She couldn't match me intellectually, but she was by no means stupid, and quite often was able to come up with a different perspective I hadn't considered or understand something better than I did due to her social skills.

No, I had no real objections to dating Kikyou. It was a common part of school life for most teenagers, to find someone special, fall in love. It was something I was curious about, but in the end, it wasn't up to me.

Kikyou had one of the most twisted minds I had ever come across. She needed to be popular, almost as a requirement for her survival. If she didn't have access to the secrets and trust of people around her, well, it was clear how unstable her psyche was. She had

threatened false rape allegations against me after just hearing her true self. She needed her position to survive.

The only issue was, quite a bit of that came from the allure she gave off as a cute single girl. Most of the boys in our grade were attracted to her on some level, which gave her an immense amount of power. The trade-off was that she could never choose one person to date without inevitably losing some of that.

That risk, or rather inevitable trade-off she would have to make, was what made me hesitant to think she would even consider a romantic relationship. Perhaps she did have feelings for me, or perhaps I was misreading the situation entirely. In any case, right now, she wasn't able to date anyone. And until she either could control the grade some other way or grew enough to be willing to sacrifice those around her for a closer relationship with one person, there was simply no chance of a romantic relationship with Kikyou.

Part of me was disappointed at this. If there was anyone in the grade that I thought could help me understand emotions, to understand love, it would have to be Kikyou. There simply wasn't anyone else I trusted enough to do so. But it was a moot point. For now, at least, there could be no progression.

And I was happy enough with finally having a best friend.

Looking at the time I realised that half an hour had gone by while I was pondering over the situation. It wasn't something I was capable of resolving now, given my limited knowledge of interpersonal relationships. More and more, I was coming to understand that stories captured real life to some degree, but not enough to use them for a basis of decision making. Life was far too complex to be properly expressed in a book.

After taking a quick shower, I pulled on the new clothes I had purchased today. A nicer button up shirt, along with some slightly fancier pants. The school didn't have any outrageously high-class places, but this restaurant was a cut above the norm, and it didn't hurt to have some clothes other than my uniform.

After yesterday's profitable venture I couldn't plead broke anymore either.

I ended up downstairs, relaxing on one of the chairs in the lobby and playing a game on my phone to while away the time. Normally at this time of night it would be rather busy, but for some reason there weren't many people around. Everyone seemed to have chosen to stay in tonight for some reason. While I waited, I only counted a couple of people, all of them returning to the dorms. Even outside, the only movement I could see was people leaving Keyaki mall and heading home. The end of the vacation was almost here, and so I guessed most people were tired and just wanted a

break.

It wasn't long though before the elevator dinged, announcing the arrival of my date.

Date as in the platonic dinner date, not at all a romantic date.

I looked over to the opening doors, only to be stunned as I saw Kikyou walk out. A resplendent crimson dress, perfectly matching her eyes, cascaded down her body, widening and swirling into a skirt from her hips down. Where it ended just before her knees, her black stockings rose to meet it, a slither of creamy white skin showing between. The dress itself was only held up by two spaghetti straps, supporting the full weight of her chest, but were barely noticeable next to the black choker she wore around her neck.

As usual, her short brown hair was held back with a headband, although she had swapped out the usual white for one matching the crimson of her dress. The barest hints of makeup were noticeable, but not any more than required, allowing her natural beauty to shine through.

A small purse was hung over one shoulder, which I assumed contained her phone and other necessities for girls. Small black heels only completely the look, giving her a slight bit more height than usual, enough to almost reach my chin.

It wasn't her usual cute look, one which she had favoured throughout the year, but a more mature and classier look. She had exchanged cute for beautiful, but even so I found I couldn't take my eyes off her.

As she walked over, I noticed the usual beaming smile wasn't quite there, head tilted slightly away from me, cheeks tinted red in embaressment. I suspected she probably hadn't dressed up this much often or even ever, based on her reaction. I'd never seen her in clothes like this, since she always favoured that cute sweetheart style of acting. This was something new for her, and it was understandable for a girl to be nervous about trying a new look.

As her not-date, it was my job to compliment her.

"You look lovely."

The blush deepened slightly, but her smile returned in full force, all previous concerns and worries blown away by those three words. The internet had taught me well.

"Ah, thank you Kiyotaka! You look pretty good yourself. I'm surprised you have any clothes other than your uniform."

And she has the audacity to insult me.

"I have other clothes. I choose not to wear them."

"Sure you do. Don't lie to me dumbass, I've seen your wardrobe. I bet you went out and bought these today." We started walking out

of the lobby, and into the early night outside.

It wasn't long though before Kikyou stumbled in her heels, and so I held an arm out for her, which she gratefully took, using it to stay upright. I received a slight blush and a muttered thanks, but out of the corner of my eye, once she thought I wasn't looking a sly grin broke out on her face. Whether it had been an accidental fumble from a lack of experience with heels, or she had let it happen on purpose I couldn't tell, but from the way she clutched my arm to her, pulling me closer, I was inclined to think it was the latter.

It wasn't worth something commenting on, so I let it pass.

"Did I do a bad job?"

"Hmm, I suppose not. Although I don't see why you didn't ask for help picking out clothes. I'm sure it was just luck that an idiot like you would be able to find anything that suits you."

In fact, it had been Karuizawa who helped me out, but I wasn't going to mention that. I'd suffered enough teasing from her already, I wasn't going to go through it again with Kikyou now.

The path split off into two directions, and before Kikyou could move in the wrong way, I led us off in the less used one, heading away from Keyaki mall and school.

"Eh? Where are we going?"

"I told you didn't I?"

"Noooo, you were very vague. Girls don't like that shit."

"I thought girls liked surprises."

"Girls like surprises, they don't like surprise trips. You should bring us stuff, not make us go places we don't know."

"That just seems lazy."

"See, you figured it out! But call me lazy again and I'll kick you in the dick. You can't insult a girl, we're always right."

"Doesn't that seem a bit unfair?"

"Do you want children Kiyotaka?"

"Got it, I'll be quiet."

Kikyou was giggling at the one-sided brutality she had just performed when we reached the road. This was one of the few road areas that students had access to, and from my planning ahead, there was a taxi waiting there.

I led us to it, before opening the back door and helping Kikyou in, before joining her. The driver in the front had been waiting for us, and after I gave him the destination we took off, the electric car drifting quietly through the school roads.

"How the hell did you organise this, Kiyotaka?" There was a combination of nervousness and disbelief in her voice, due to the unusual situation we were in.

I shrugged. "Do you have any idea how large this school is? It's

larger than the Vatican. There's a huge amount of places that most students never get to, simply because it's too far away."

I had spent the first month here running around the campus exploring. Not only was it good exercise, but I also got to explore all the far reaching locations most people never went too. There was a map available, but even with that I still found a lot of things not mentioned.

"And so, we're going to one of those places?"

"The school's too large to get around easily, so students are able to hire taxi's to get around. There was a nice restaurant I saw on the very far side that I wanted to try, and since I owed you for the island, I thought 'why not'."

"For just dinner with a friend, you really put a lot of effort in," Kikyou sighed, before softly taking my hand in hers.

The rest of the short drive passed in silence as we watched the school go past. The further we went, the less interesting things there were. Buildings became more and more industrial, and school storage was common. But every now and then there was a new park, or a potential outing place. How they managed to stay open when almost no students came out here was astounding, but I guessed the school would provide most of the funding.

The driver pulled up outside the restaurant, and as I paid for the short trip he took a look outside, before nervously asking how long we were going to be.

"I don't imagine we'll be out too late," I replied. It didn't seem to resolve his concerns, but the driver let it go.

"Enjoy your date, you two."

"Oh, it's not a date," I corrected.

"Definitely not a date," Kikyou added cheekily.

I climbed out of the car, and when Kikyou had slid over, I helped her out as well. The door shut, and the taxi drove away, not waiting around for our return trip. I would have to book another one to go home tonight, but that wasn't a big deal.

The first few drops of rain were coming down just as we entered the restaurant, to find it was empty of guests. Unsurprising since it was so far away. We were practically as far from the dorms as you could get without leaving the school.

"Ah, welcome sir and madam. A table for two, I assume?"

After we indicated yes, the server led us over to a table in the corner of the room, handed us two menus, a bottle of water and two glasses, before leaving us to ourselves.

"Are you sure about this, Kiyotaka? I know I said a nice dinner, and I'm not going to let you get out of it, but this place is really expensive." Even for someone with expensive taste like Kikyou, who

had enjoyed eating out with friends all year, this restaurant was still quite expensive. I suppose that was how they survived being so far away.

"It's fine. I made a huge number of points with the water scheme last night. Thank you for helping with that, by the way."

Kikyou gave me an unimpressed look. "I've been trying to help your image, and then you go and extort the entire school."

"And who was the one person giving out water for free?"

"Yes yes, I spared a few people from the tyrannical takeover of Ayanokouji and his lazy bitch friend. I guess if it pays for dinner then I don't really care."

It was time to put a stop to this ongoing concern Kikyou had for me. If she was constantly worried about my safety, there was always a chance she would miss some important information.

"Look, you don't need to worry about me. There's not a student here who can match me, and even if the entire grade was united against me, I'd still give myself even odds."

That was an exaggeration. If everyone in the grade wanted me gone and worked together, there was probably nothing I could do to stop it. If I had Kikyou by my side though? There was a fighting chance.

"Ah, fine. I trust you won't be a complete moron, only just an idiot."

Apparently, we'd had long enough to think, because the waiter had returned to our table, asking if we'd decided what we wanted.

"I'll have a meatlovers pizza." Pizza was a meal I'd only made for myself, since the pizza place here had a rumour of being very low quality. I was curious to see what the difference between mine and a proper restaurant would be.

"I'd like the eye fillet steak, medium rare."

"And would you like any drinks?" the waiter asked, while quickly writing down our orders.

"I'm just happy with water." My response got an angry look from Kikyou.

"Aren't we here to celebrate winning, Kiyotaka? I'll have the watermelon mocktail."

"Fine. I'll have the strawberry mocktail then." I sighed. Although I said I didn't care about the points, this was going to be a rather expensive night.

"Your meals won't be too long," the waiter smiled, before leaving us alone again.

I looked around again, only to notice that the restaurant was still empty. It was seven now, which should have been one of the busiest times for dinner, and yet no one was here.

"I'm surprised it's so empty," I thought aloud.

"I mean it is really far away from school. And with the weather, I kinda get it..." Kikyou was looking outside through the nearby window, where rain was starting to come down a bit heavier now.

"Even so, I had heard it was rather popular with the third years. I guess they have more points saved up by now." I then turned my attention to another interesting point. "Steak? Honestly, I'm surprised."

The reaction my observation garnered was a combination of gratefulness and frustration, an usual duo.

"Thank you so fucking much for taking me here. God, there's nothing better than a good steak, all juicy and bloody and tender. The succulent taste of tearing into meat, it's amazing."

Clearly, she had some issues. I just hoped that wasn't an extension of her desire to crush people.

"So?" My lax response got a hardened glare.

"You don't get it, do you? Cute girls don't eat steak. They don't get any good food. No, when I'm out with those airhead fucktard girls, we have to get the smallest, most expensive fucking meal, and then spend ages taking photos. It's not even a snack! And they're all so fucking happy to get two satay skewers for 3000 points, it's sickening. I have to starve myself every time I go out with them, and it's been four fucking months since I had a steak!"

I grabbed her hand in an attempt to calm her down before she lost it in a restaurant. The waiter was looking over curiously, but like a good worker didn't come over or make a comment.

This was clearly a sore point for Kikyou. Deep down, she wasn't a girly sort of person, not as much as most people. Sure, she still cared about her appearance, and wanted to be treated like a girl, but the insignificant, useless parts that society expected of her, those were all an act. The real Kikyou was much more aggressive, much more assertive than she pretended to be.

Except, it seemed, when it came to me. Then she had no problem falling back into typical gender roles.

"I guess we'll just have to go out for dinner more often."

She smiled at me, a smile of genuine thanks, before shifting her expression into one of indifference.

"You could just cook steak too, you know? Friends don't just go out to dinner together every week." But they cook each other (read: just me) meals alone often?

"That would be a lot cheaper," I admitted.

"Hah! So, you are worried about the price. I knew it!" Kikyou exclaimed in satisfaction.

"For just this once? Not really. I can't do this too often though."

That wasn't quite true. For the price of switching classes, I could also eat here every day for the rest of school, and still not come close to running out of points. Really, it was a difficult choice to make. Changing classes was absurdly expensive.

Soon enough, our meals arrived, and while I paced myself, taking in the texture of the pizza, considering the depth, how crispy the base is, Kikyou went right in and devoured the steak as fast as possible.

She didn't make a mess, but was walking a fine line, dripping onto the plate or her napkin quite often as she shovelled the meat into her mouth, a look of pleasure on her face as she enjoyed something that had been deprived for months.

"Is it good?" All I got in response was a moan.

Honestly, this was starting to become a bit disturbing.

There wasn't much conversation as we ate, enjoying the high-quality food that was provided. My pizza had been cooked to almost perfection, topped with every kind of meat there was. Kikyou's steak was also perfect, medium rare just as asked, and not too chewy.

I finished my pizza and leaned back contentedly. The meal had been delicious, and I could tell that Kikyou felt the same.

"Ah, that was amazing!"

"Considering that they're so far away, it was definitely worth the price." Of course, the meal had cost more than one would usually pay, as far as I could tell, but accounting for distance and lack of customers, the quality more than made up for that.

The waiter came back and removed our plates from the table, leaving the two of us to slowly sip on our mocktails. It was an interesting drink, but I was glad Kikyou had convinced me to have one.

"Ne, Kiyotaka, I know this place has good desert, but I really don't feel like it."

As we entered, we had gone past a display of exquisite cakes and treats, all of which looked delicious. I had the intent to sample some of them, but I too was feeling rather full after that meal.

"Yeah, I don't think I'm up for desert."

The waiter returned, and after responding no to his question about desert, I got up from my chair, before helping Kikyou do the same. She had taken off her heels while we ate, clearly sore from even just the short walk in them, but bravely put them back on, intent on finishing the night in style.

Since it had been my idea to go out for dinner, and I had promised her a good meal in the first place, I ended up paying the entire 7086 point bill myself. From the smug smile on her face, it

was clear I had made the correct decision. Even on a not-date, it seemed it was my job as the school entrepreneur to pay.

I held out my arm to her, which she gratefully clung onto again, before moving to leave the store.

"You know, I'm honestly surprised, Kiyotaka."

"Surprised?"

"You didn't fuck up the not-date." I was curious at her insistence at calling it that, as if trying to draw to attention the date part, but I let it go in favour of the insult.

"I know what I'm doing," I answered proudly.

"You googled the entire thing didn't you?" she accused.

"Yes," I responded, just as proudly.

A sigh, before she tilted her head on my shoulder. "Well, you didn't do too badly."

And the evening ended perfectly, without a single hiccup.

At least it should have, except we stepped outside.

Authors Notes:

Apologies for the delayed chapter. I had a lot of trouble with this one, and wanted to make sure it was good. Next chapter will be out tomorrow.

This chapter is pure fluff stuff. As explained, Kushida can't really have a boyfriend, this is something I've seen addressed multiple times, but that doesn't mean she wants to be alone. And hence, the not-date. Stepping stones.

Honestly, i got way too fixated on the clothes they would be wearing, and it might have gone out of character for them, but i like the idea of them dressing up for a night out. Cute Kikyou always better, but she could pull off anything.

This is part 1 of a two part story, the second part will be out tomorrow. Unlike this, a lot more stuff will happen, because i can't allow their date to go well. It has to be fun, not just sweet.

Just for interest, I've never been writing in a weirder spot before. It's currently 7:15pm at late night Christmas shopping on the 23rd for me. Out with my sister for last minute items, and since the shops are open all night (literally not closing, that's a weird thing for me) I'm going to live in the food court, take a break to go watch spiderman and then keep writing here. Honestly it's so strange that I can just be here until 3am, but I'm gonna live with it. Looking forward to silence in a shopping center, McNuggets and writing.

As always hope you enjoyed.

Arc 5 Chapter 5 - Definitely Not a Date Part 2

We walked out the door of the restaurant, only to find a massive storm had been brewing while we were here. The walls of the place were surprisingly thick, and somehow neither of us had noticed the lightning, heavy winds or rain smashing against the window.

There was a small amount of shelter under an overhang outside the restaurant, and that was where we were huddled, trying to avoid the rain and wind, only mostly successfully.

"Kiyotaka! What's going on, where's the taxi!"

I looked down at my phone, only to find they'd suspended their services due to the weather. That explained the nervous look the driver had given me.

"Apparently they're not available in the storm."

"What do you mean they're not available?! How did you let this happen?!"

"Well, I didn't realise they wouldn't run in bad weather."

"Why the hell wouldn't you check that!"

"How was I supposed to know there was going to be a storm?" Seriously, what was she on about?

In response to my denial of guilt, Kikyou stared up at me with an incredulous face, before reaching up and grabbing me by my collar.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?! How did you not know there was going to be a storm?!"

Eh?

"The school sent everyone a fucking warning! Literally EVERYONE KNEW THERE WAS GOING TO BE A FUCKING STORM!"

Oh. If that was the case, I could see why she was upset.

"Why didn't you tell me then?"

"I figured you already knew like literally everyone else you dumbass!"

"I didn't see it?"

"AAAAAAAAA!!!!"

Kikyou screamed at me, before turning around to try and recompose herself.

This certainly was quite a predicament.

"I guess we can't get a taxi back then." I opened the weather app on my phone, something I didn't think I'd need to check for going to dinner, only to see it was forecast to storm until early in the morning. "And staying here isn't really an option."

"So then, Mr I'm-a-genius-who-can't-check-the-weather, what do you think we do?"

I looked around, considering our options. There was no way the school would send someone to get us in this weather. We could stay in the restaurant, but I would rather get home tonight and get to bed. I suppose walking was out of the question. I could make it easily enough, but I doubted Kikyou would want to follow, even if I offered to carry her the entire way.

There weren't a lot of choices really. The storm was getting progressively worse, with the wind reaching incredible speeds. It was starting to take a bit of effort to stay upright, even sheltered as we were. And I had seen lightning strikes in a couple of places possibly on the school grounds by now.

I continued to look around casually, with no panic in my movements, which seemed to be infuriating Kikyou even further. I could tell she was about to start yelling again when...

Oh. That could work.

"Take off your shoes."

"Excuse me?"

"We're going for a walk."

"I'm not taking off my shoes. My stockings will get ruined."

"Would you rather walk in heels or stockings."

That seemed to frustrate her, as she realised, I was right. I got a dirty look as she took them off, but even so, she didn't make a move to follow.

"I'm not going out there." Expected, but annoying.

"Would you rather stay out here all night?"

She actually growled at me at that, and still refused to move.

"I'm not walking back to the dorms in this," she insisted. "Do you have any idea how far it is?"

I took a moment to do some mental maths. It wasn't that far, but the roads were winding in order to accommodate for buildings, meaning it took a lot longer to get here than if we had driven as the crow flies.

"Probably about a kilometer. But that's no fun. Why would we walk?"

Without explaining any longer, I took off, out of the cover and began walking to my destination. It only took a few seconds before I was soaked to the bone, but I wasn't concerned about my clothes.

Looking back, I saw that Kikyou was still sheltering under the overhang.

"Move!"

She jolted at my slightly raised tone, and quickly followed me out into the rain, only for her dress to become instantly soaked. That wasn't my concern, as I continued to head towards the object of our salvation.

It wasn't long before I reached it. A lone convertible sports car parked outside a bottle shop, roof currently up.

"Are you going to ask for a lift?"

I stared at the drenched Kikyou in surprise. "Of course not. I'm going to steal it."

I tried the door handle to find it was unlocked, with the keys still in the ignition. Whoever had parked here was either very careless, didn't think they'd be long, or simply too trusting. Possibly a combination of all of them.

"You can't be serious."

I slid into the car, flexing my hands on the wheel, and shifting the seat back to make room. I looked up at the person standing next to the driver's door with an apprehensive look on her face.

"Well? Get in."

Kikyou still seemed torn, but after a look at the sky, she quickly made her way around to the passenger side and slid in.

"Are you sure about this?"

I shrugged. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"What's the worst- What's the worst that could happen he asks! I don't know perhaps expulsion for STEALING A FUCKING CAR?!"

"That only happens if anyone sees us."

And with that I hit the button to put back the roof, and ever so slowly it moved backwards, allowing the rain to begin spilling in.

"AAAhhh Kiyotaka what are you doing!"

"Do you expect me to drive such a fine vehicle without putting the roof back? That's half the fun."

And with those words, I started the engine, and took off from the parking lot, a lot faster than one would normally do in this weather. But how could I be at fault? I had extensive driving training, and this car was exceptionally fast.

Kikyou next to me was struggling to put on her seatbelt, while at the same time protect her handbag from the rain. She managed to get the buckle in, just in time for me to swerve around a corner at an impossible speed.

"Slow down! You're gonna get us killed you bastard!"

"Relax. If you just relaxed, you probably enjoy yourself."

"How can I relax when yoAAAAGGHHH!"

Before she could finish her sentence, I went around another corner, throwing Kikyou into the door, before skidding to a stop in the middle of the service road.

Hmm, this was rather fun. And with all the rain, I didn't think any security cameras would be able to identify us, meaning there would be no consequences for this. What an opportunity.

"he... hehe... hahahaHAHAHA!"

I looked to my right, only to find a cackling devil beside me, eyes wide and cheeks flushed from excitement.

"Having fun yet?"

"You're fucking crazy! We're going to die!"

"Do you want to get out?"

"Fuck no! Drive!"

It was always fascinating how people reacted in dangerous situations. When they were brought close to death, or at least thought they were going to die, and released all their inhibitions. I had seen men break down into tears, beg for their lives or family. I had seen them find peace and accept what they thought was coming. I had even seen people's sanity snap. But I had never seen someone as eager as this.

Maybe she thought I would do everything I could to avoid crashing. It was the fine line between excitement and death she was enjoying. But this madness, the excitement of real risk, possibly for the first time in her life, had freed the mind of Kikyou.

And who was I to deny her request.

I revved the engine, before spinning around and heading back along the road we had come from. The storm was getting wilder by the second, the car absolutely soaked.

"WOOOOOOO!"

There she went again, screaming her head off, enjoying the risk. This was true freedom. Not the power she held over people with their secrets, not to be loved by everyone and held above, but to risk your life and enjoy it.

The roads were getting dangerously slippery, a thin layer of water covering them completely now. The drainage wasn't designed to handle rainfall of this level, and I could feel a change in the air.

The wind was buffeting the sports car, and every movement was amplified. I could feel the back wheels slipping as we drove, every slight turn I had to fight losing control of the car.

The storm was raging heavily, lightning snapping across the sky above us. The trees lining the road bent backwards under the heavy gale.

I felt my hair stand on end, the smell of ozone fill the air.

'CRACK'

A bolt of lightning struck nearby, not 50 meters from the road. This in turn only resulted in a redoubling of giggles from the devil beside me.

Suddenly, without any warning, the wind got too much, and a tree finally broke, snapping at the trunk and falling directly in front of us, covering the road. I ignored the piercing scream from the person beside me and jerked the wheel to the left with my foot slammed on the break, performing the sharpest possible turn I could.

The car spun, but not enough due to the speed we were going, and the gutter of the road became a ramp, launching us off the road, and onto the green that covered most of the campus.

Instantly, I could feel the difference to before. The ground was soaked from the rain and was doing it's very best to grasp to the tires and hold us down. I couldn't get bogged here, that would only spell our expulsion, which for me was the end. No, this truly had become a battle between life and death.

I was sure the grass we were driving over would be ruined, and would take weeks or even months to repair, but that wasn't a concern right now. Constantly, the ground before us was covered in trees, bushes, hills and valleys, and even the occasional pond. It was only by the skin of my teeth that we managed to miss them all.

Unfortunately, I could tell we were rapidly approaching the dorms. I couldn't justify this ride continuing forever. There was one last spot I wanted to hit before I stopped though.

I spun the car around, throwing mud up in the air and into the car. Looking to my side I could see that Kikyou was completely covered, and her dress was probably ruined. A shame, but I was confident she had plenty others. Half of her outings with friends were clothes shopping after all.

It seemed to have broken her spell at least, the sudden splattering of mud bringing her back to a completely lucid state.

I didn't say anything, and simply watched as she tried to wipe mud off of her face, a disgusted look showing just how she felt about the mud in her hair.

It wasn't long before she looked over at me, having gotten over the mud relatively fast, the same psychotic grin back on her face.

"Are we back?"

In response I simply revved the engine again, drawing her attention to what was in front of us.

"No."

"Come on, you enjoyed everything else."

"Don't you fucking dare."

I revved the engine again.

"You insane bitch don't even try it."

The car shot forward as fast as I could make it go in the mud.

"No no no no no NO NO NO NO NOOOOOO!" Her last no turned into a screech as we launched off the top of the small hill and took to the air. For just a moment it felt like flying, my body lifting slightly from weightlessness, as the car hung in the stormy night air.

I looked out the side of the car, and for a moment I thought I had miscalculated. The water of the small pond was getting closer much faster than I had expected, rising, rising, the car was inching forward until...

We just made it, the back wheels spinning slightly in the very edge of the pond.

I spun the car around once again, before pulling up not too far from the dorms. It was never possible to get here without getting wet to begin with, but at this point any more rain wouldn't make a single bit of difference.

Just then I noticed a slight stinging in my arm, and upon looking to my left, I saw Kikyou repeatedly hitting my arm as hard as she could.

"You! Stupid! Fucking! Idiot! Almost! Got! Us! Killed!" Every yell was punctuated by another punch. Before she could hit me anymore, I reached out and caught her hand mid-air.

"Don't act as if you didn't enjoy it."

She took a moment to breath, before leaning back in her seat and letting out one last chuckle.

"Oh god, I did. It was fun. Hahaha, that was so much fun." She twisted in her seat to look behind us. "But we are so fucked. Holy god are we doomed."

Kikyou was referring to the massive muddy tire tracks we had left all across campus, not even considering the punishment from stealing a car.

"I wouldn't be too worried. I'm pretty sure we weren't caught on a camera."

I had kept a close watch as to where all the cameras were. It was a little harder while driving, but I was confident motion blur on top of the torrential rain would make it impossible to work out who we were.

"That doesn't fix the fucking car."

I looked down at the beautiful car, now full of mud and water. It was a fine piece of machinery, surprisingly powerful enough to drive through the school grounds without any problems, and I was loath to give it up. But there simply was no other way to hide it.

"Hop out for a second."

Kikyou dubiously obeyed my command and stepped back to

watch as I started to slowly roll the car forward.

"Kiyotaka... you do know there's an ocean there?"

"That's the idea."

And ever so slowly, I let the car roll forward by itself, before jumping out of the seat and watching as the car fell off the school and into the water, in the exact same spot as I had dumped stuff the night before.

I really needed a new disposal spot, before evidence began piling up.

"Did you just..."

"I hope you didn't leave anything in it." I had no desire to go for a swim to get a handbag.

"No, but is that all it takes?"

I shrugged again. "No fingerprints, and no cameras. All the evidence is circumstantial. If anyone asks, we walked back from the restaurant. There's no way to prove otherwise."

If there was a serious investigation, and I was certain there would be, there was no solid evidence to prove we had broken any rules or laws. That said, the circumstantial evidence was quite high, and while we couldn't be punished, we'd certainly be under a much higher level of scrutiny than before.

"Just don't break any rules from now on and you'll be fine."

I pulled out my phone, to find it was still working. A pleasant surprise, but not unexpected. I wasn't sure how well it would handle a downpour, but clearly they were built to last at least this.

"A question. If we had walked back, would you have made me carry you?"

Based on the current time, it was roughly when we would arrive at the dorms if we had walked. The car trip had taken the perfect amount of time.

"Obviously. But why?"

I stepped forward, and swept Kikyou up in my arms, holding her in a princess carry. She let out a little eep, but what I noticed the most was the slight shivering in her body from the cold. I would have to hurry to get us inside and to a warm shower.

"If we walked back, we have to play the part." Saying this I began to walk through the rain and mud, doing my best to flee the battlefield like a World War One soldier. The conditions were horrendous, and I could see why the school had sent out a warning. Summer storms truly were furious.

"Right. I trust you."

The excitement and cold as a combination had work Kikyou out considerably, and so she put up no resistance as I made my way through the blind spots, until I could approach the dorms from the

correct angle we would have walked from.

The tempered air of the lobby was a welcome change from the rain outside. No one was around, probably having retired to their rooms for the night, meaning there was no one to see us track mud and water all the way into the elevator.

Now I had a decision to make. In just the short amount of time I had been walking, Kikyou's adrenaline had drained away, and now she was progressively getting worse. It was obvious I couldn't leave her alone, since she would need someone to help her get cleaned up.

The rules were very clear that boys couldn't enter girls' dormitories after 8pm. Of course, I'd never heard of this being enforced, but there were cameras in the halls.

On the other hand, I wouldn't be able to easily change which room she was in and taking her to my room would mean she had to stay there.

Deciding it was worth the risk, I hit the button for floor 11, before fishing around in Kikyou's purse and pulling out her room card.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, I made my way down the hall, and into room 1106. There would be too many questions if I was seen, and so I quickly unlocked the door and made my way in, flicking on the light as I did so.

This wasn't the first time I'd been to her room, but I'd never stayed for any particular length of time.

I carried Kikyou through her room and into the bathroom, placing her gently in the bathtub. In a worrying turn of events, I didn't receive any sarcastic quip or insult, instead having a shivering girl curling up to conserve any warmth at all.

I took her purse off her, which she gave up without a fight, and emptied the contents onto the nearby basin, to give them a chance to dry out, her phone especially. Like mine, it seemed to still be working, but I didn't want to risk breaking it. She probably didn't back it up as much as I did.

"Who do you want me to call?"

I had no idea how to care for a sick girl beyond what I had read in books. That, however, was rather inconsiderate, focusing on effective methods rather than any consideration for the sick person in question. This meant that I would need help in the empathy department, and Kikyou would probably want a woman to be the one to help her wash and get changed.

That raised and entirely different problem though. This was an embarrassing situation, but it would also garner a lot of sympathy from whoever saw it. Since Kikyou actually despised most of her so-

called 'friends', any of them being kind and showing their concern for her well-being overly much would only serve to irritate her further. She needed someone that could keep quiet, and would understand boundaries.

"M-Matsushita." She managed to squeeze out the name through her shivering.

That was a good choice. It seemed Kikyou had also noticed the inconsistencies of Matsushita, and seen through her act, at least enough to know that she was a good confidant, and someone who could appreciate discretion, who knows not to push too hard.

Pulling out my phone, I dialed Matsushita's number, only for her to answer almost instantly.

"I hope you aren't about to tell me there's no water again?"

I sighed. That was a reputation I wouldn't lose any time soon.

"I need your help."

"What's going on?" Instantly she shifted into a business tone.

"Come to Kikyou's room. We got caught in the storm."

"I'm on my way. Prepare to be teased~"

She hung up the phone before I could respond, but if anything, I appreciated her efficiency. Matsushita had quickly realised that I wouldn't be calling her to a girl's room at 8 o'clock at night unless it was something serious. Thank goodness for small mercies in the form of intelligent people.

I left the bathroom and went over to Kikyous bed, pulling her pyjamas out from under her pillow, and pulled a pair of panties out from her bedside draw, before leaving them in a pile in the bathroom.

A knocking on the door alerted me to the presence of Matsushita. I grabbed a spare towel from the bathroom and began to wipe myself down somewhat as I made my way to the door. Most of the mud had come out in the rain during our last walk, but there was still some stuck in my hair, or staining my clothes. They would probably have to be thrown out.

I walked over the door, and after looking through the peephole to confirm it was Matsushita, I opened the door and ushered her in.

"Wow, you really are drenched. Where is she?"

"Bathroom. There's dry clothes in there already."

Without another word she vanished off into the room I named. This was something I appreciated about Matsushita: her ability to focus when the time called for it.

Leaving the two girls to whatever they had to do, I moved to the well-equipped kitchen and put the kettle on. A warm cup of tea was something I had been looking forward to for a while now, and would be a good way to warm up from the cold and wet.

My hair had dried at this point, but there was nothing to be done for my shirt. It was far too soaked to be able to dry, so I took it off and bundled it up, before tossing it into the sink. Once it was gone, it made drying off my body that much easier.

Running water and muffled voices could be heard coming from the bathroom, and after about 10 minutes, just after I poured out a couple of cups of tea, Matsushita emerged, supporting a tired by now dry Kikyou.

I watched as Kikyou was marched over to bed, and then tucked in, surrounded by her stuffed toy collection, something that always amused me, due to its continued growth in size.

"Why'd you call Matsushita-san, Kiyotaka," she pouted at me from bed.

"You told me to."

"Ah, too much of a coward to undress me yourself then?" A smug grin grew on the slightly delirious face.

"Kushida-san, you shouldn't say things like—

"Maybe I will next time," I challenged, cutting off a blushing Matsushita.

"You wouldn't dare. You don't have the balls."

I walked over to the bed and placed the back of my hand on her forehead in an attempt to take her temperature. She was slightly warmer than ususal, but nothing to be concerned about. In response to my care and consideration, Kikyou attempted to bite me, forcing me to quickly withdraw my hand.

"I guess I won't call for help next time. You'll be stuck with me."

"Trapped alone with a soaking wet girl and you don't even do anything, how boring."

"Careful, or I might just. There's still plenty of night left."

I turned away to go back to the kitchen and grab the tea, ignoring the singsong 'coward kiyo' echoing from the room behind me. Matsushita, who was still very red from the interaction she had just witnessed, quickly followed me.

"I assume we can count on your digression?"

"Yeah... but what happened?"

I shrugged. "We were out for dinner and forgot about the storm. It was a long walk back in the rain."

Matsushita was doing her very best to avert her eyes from my naked torso, towel wrapped around my waist.

"Would you mind putting a shirt on?"

"It's in the sink. If you want me to get hypothermia, then sure." She glanced over, only to see my crumpled, muddy and soaking wet shirt lying there.

"I see." I handed her a cup of tea, which she gratefully accepted. I

had made a third one for Kikyou, but she wasn't able to drink it right now. The bottle of water I had placed by her bedside was a much more suitable thing for her now.

"Did she say anything to you?" I needed to make sure that in her half-delirious state, Kikyou hadn't said anything incriminating.

"No, not really, just mutterings about rain, idiot Kiyotaka and T-bone steak? I wasn't sure about the last one."

Good, so she hadn't mentioned the car at all.

"That, I couldn't tell you." I thought for a second, before deciding her opinion held some value. "What's your prognosis?"

Matsushita took a dignified sip of tea, pondering the question for a moment before answering. "I think she'll be fine. Probably just a cold tomorrow, but nothing some good rest can't fix." A sly grin slowly grew on her face. "Those were some nice clothes the two of you were wearing. Fancy dinner alone? You wouldn't happen to have gone on a date, would you?"

And here it was, the inevitable teasing.

"It wasn't a date."

"Definitely not a date," we heard waft in from the bed, in a delirious tone.

"Ohhh, now I get it. Don't worry, I won't tell a soul." Matsushita smirked, tapping her nose as she said this.

"I appreciate your help," I offered, only for Matsushita to wave my thanks away.

"Don't worry, I'm more than happy to help. Kushida-san is a good friend of mine. I'm glad to see she's taking an interest in a boy. She's always been so non-committal whenever the topic comes up."

I looked over to where Kikyou had fallen asleep, slight smile on her face. Time had been passing quickly, and it was already getting closer to nine. The later it got, the more suspicious my presence here became. I was already breaking rules by being in a girl's dorm after 8pm.

"Can I leave her with you for tonight?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I'll make sure Kushida-san gets to sleep, and I'll check on her again in the morning."

I finished my tea, and washed up the teacups, before picking up my soaking shirt and reluctantly putting it back on. The only thing worse than being caught up here at this time would be to be caught without a shirt on.

I handed my towel back to Matsushita, who grudgingly took hold of the soaking object. "Here, deal with this."

"Great, thanks. Actually, I'll let Kushida-san know it was the one you used. She'll probably never wash it again."

"That doesn't seem very hygienic."

"Ah, but the manly musk of Ayanokouji is trapped in it. That's something she will want to keep forever."

"Goodnight, Matsushita."

The last thing I heard before walking out of the room was a very cheeky 'goodnight, lover boy.'

Authors Notes:

So, here is part two of definitely not a date. A lot more exciting stuff happened in this chapter, as opposed to the fluff before. I had to embellish both on the storm, as well as the size of the campus to make this work, but the idea was just too fun that i didn't care about slight inaccuracies.

Currently no plans to do the fortune teller, because honestly I don't think it would add anything more to the characters, and there's been enough KiyoKikyou fluff already. Moving right onto the pool next, because that has to happen. If anyone does want the fortune teller for some reason, let me know and I might write it anyway.

Merry Christmas to everyone. It's been a tough year, and I hope y'all are staying safe. Think about it, it can only get worse really, so why bother worrying.

As always, hope you enjoyed.

Arc 5 Chapter 6 - Premonitions

The next morning, Kikyou was still ill.

She had recovered significantly from last night's downpour, up and moving about her apartment when I came to visit in the morning, but still had a serious enough cold to the point in which she had decided to stay in for today.

I got reamed out for threatening to undress her in front of Matsushita, but upon being reminded she had dared me to do it first, she shut up enough for me to cook her breakfast.

Once that was done, I left her to her illness to go and explore some rumours I had heard about in Keyaki Mall.

Apparently there was a fortune teller at the school who was giving very accurate predictions.

I didn't believe they had the ability to tell the future. For that you'd have to be psychic. But I was curious as to how good this fortune teller worked, based on how I understood it. Cold reading. The ability to give a reading, a prediction of one's future based on a massive amount of past data. In other words, they interpret patterns to understand people.

A good fortune teller can extract information from the person they're reading through a short conversation. They can pick up on things that the person themselves hasn't noticed.

It was a difficult skill, to be able to convince a person that you know more about them than you do and being able to extract information without the mark noticing was incredibly difficult.

I was curious as to how well they would be able to read me.

Unfortunately, I made a mistake in my planning.

"I might have messed up," I muttered.

The intense late-August heat blazed down upon me. I saw a shimmering heat haze ahead, above the concrete, and through the roadside trees. The dorm rooms came equipped with air conditioning, so we didn't feel the heat much indoors. However, it was summer, and in direct sunlight, you instantly started sweating buckets.

The heat reduced people to complete lumps. I desperately sought out shade. Fortunately, the school boasted a rather expansive campus littered with tons of trees.

It was 9:30 A.M., well before most student activities, as I made

my way towards the fabled fortune-teller. Fortune-telling services were supposed to begin at ten, but I didn't plan to stick around for long. I'd quickly get my fortune read, then leave just as quickly. That was my plan.

But as I neared my destination, I realised my plans were about to be shattered.

I had expected Keyaki Mall to be nearly empty. Instead, the opposite held true. Numerous students lounged around in their summer clothes, most of which I suspected were here for the same reason I was. There was a general trend in the movement of students heading towards the elevators, and I watched from a distance as more and more of them headed up to the fifth floor.

This wouldn't do. I wasn't sure how busy it would be, but if each fortune took even 10 minutes, it could be an hours-long line.

I turned to my left and headed towards the emergency stairs. They weren't meant to be used normally, but with all the students in the elevators I thought it would be much quicker to sprint up some stairs than to wait in line or squeeze in with 10 other people.

The stairwell wasn't air conditioned, and the instant I stepped in I could feel the heat, probably the reason it was off limits, but I took off running anyway. Running up stairs was an unusual experience, but it didn't take long to reach the fifth floor.

When I reached the area where the fortune teller was situated, there was an even more confusing situation.

"There are couples everywhere."

Boys and girls stood in pairs all over. A number of them seemed to be in relationships. Of course, there were groups of only boys and only girls, but those were far fewer.

Seeing a fortune-teller about a couple's future and romantic compatibility was common, I supposed. However, it made this visit significantly more awkward than I'd anticipated. Not many people had come alone to have their fortune told. Single guys were fewer still.

Looking around, I noticed a written sign:

"Guidance is for couples only. We humbly ask for your understanding."

That explained the number of couples. It seemed I wouldn't be able to have my fortune read today unless I dragged someone alone with me under the guise of a relationship. Unfortunately, the only person I could realistically ask was Kikyou, and she was too sick to come today, meaning I would probably miss out.

I was about to leave, when I felt a tap on my shoulder, and a cheeful greeting reached my ears.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun, you're here too!"

I spun around only to find the one and only Ichinose Honami standing in front of me, a bright smile on her face. As expected of such an outgoing girl, she had a fabulous dress sense, wearing a white blouse and a long blue skirt. Simple but enhancing her natural beauty.

"Ichinose. I guess you wanted your fortune told as well."

She nodded at my question, face falling slightly. "Ah, yes I did. I came along with Mako-chan and Himeno-san, but when we found out it was couples only, the two of them wanted to go in together."

So Ichinose had been sidelined. That was surprising, but I guess there was a deeper bond between Amikura and Himeno of Class B than I had expected. Surprising, both since Amikura was Ichinose's co-conspirator, and I would have thought the two of them would seek future guidance for their class, and I didn't think that Amikura was interested in girls. She'd been making eyes at Ryuuen whenever I saw her. Himeno was clearly important to her.

I pulled myself out of my thoughts. I had an opportunity right before me.

"I didn't realise that the two of them were dating."

"I don't think they are. I didn't even realise they were close to be honest. Himeno's a quiet girl, so it's definitely an odd match."

There was something fishy going on, but now wasn't the time. Himeno was someone to investigate, but not for now

"Do you want to line up together?" I asked bluntly.

"Ah, I was just thinking that too! I don't want to miss out, so sure, I don't mind."

Ichinose didn't even have a hint of embarrassment at the question, as expected of such a social person. She understood the practicality of the situation and made sure not to make it weird. At her agreement, the two of us walked over to the back of the line.

The clerk came over to confirm that Ichinose and I were a pair, and after confirming the lie handed us a ticket. There were eight pairs in front of us, including Amikura and Himeno, and even if the fortune teller managed their time well, we would still be here for well over an hour.

"Looks like we'll be here for a while."

"Hmm, then I guess I have a chance to pick your brain again."

As expected, Ichinose took the opportunity to try and interrogate me, even in a friendly manner. But her next question absolutely threw me.

"Did you happen to notice the tyre tracks on the campus grounds this morning?"

I tensed slightly at this. Everyone had noticed them, they were hard to miss. I carefully considered my response before answering.

"It would be hard to miss them."

Ichinose smiled, but there was a devious glint in her eyes as she began the interrogation.

"You see, Ayanokouji-kun, the student council has been put in charge of finding out what happened. We're not supposed to tell any students about the incident."

"Then you probably shouldn't be talking about it." Avoiding the topic was a good strategy.

"Ah, but the Student Council President himself suggested I talk to you about it." And there was the danger. I was being forced into the investigation.

Outwardly, I just shrugged. "He should know I don't care."

"He said you'd say something like that," Ichinose sighed. "He also said you might have an idea of what happened already."

I didn't know how much Manabu might have told Ichinose. Whether he mentioned Kikyou and I being near the location of the initial theft or not, I would have to work under the assumption that he did.

"I know that someone stole a car and took it for a joyride, because it almost hit me last night." Ichinose was taken aback at my words, proving she didn't know why Manabu wanted to talk to me.

"Eh? You saw it?"

"I was out for dinner when the storm hit, and I had to walk home. I didn't think I'd be almost hit by a car in the middle of the park. Beyond that I don't know anything."

"Is that all? I was honestly expecting you to know more, Ayanokouji-kun. I guess I started to think of you as a larger-than-life figure." She seemed genuinely dejected at my lack of knowledge.

"Sorry. I'm pretty sure there were two people in there, and the driver had blonde hair, but that's all I know."

"Blonde hair huh?"

One pair finished their consultation, and everyone in the line shuffled forward. Based on the time, it was probably about 10 minutes.

"I can offer guesses, but I really don't have any other information. I was more focused on getting Kikyou out of the cold."

"Kushida-san, huh? Were you two out on a date?" That sly look was something I was coming to hate from every girl who had it.

"I lost a bet and owed her dinner. I had to carry her home in the rain last night and she caught a cold."

The teasing look was quickly replaced with an apologetic one. "I'm sorry for teasing. I did hear that she was sick today. I guess that explains why, and why she didn't tell anyone." Ichinose did seem

genuinely considerate for her plight, but I was more surprised at the fact that she already knew that Kikyou was sick. News really did travel fast amongst girls.

"I'll appreciate it if you don't tell that to people." We were talking quietly already so that the people in front didn't hear about the theft, so I wasn't concerned about eavesdroppers.

"I understand, Ayanokouji-kun. You can count on my digression." And I believed her, at least for now. "As for the car, I suppose I can tell you some details."

"Oh?"

Ichinose nodded, before quickly looking around once again. "So, as you know someone stole a car and drove it around." After my confirmation she continued, "but what you probably didn't know was that it disappeared."

"Are you saying the school lost a car?"

Ichinose nodded in embarrassment.

"We've got no idea where it went. Nagumo-kun was insisting that someone dumped it into the water, but the only gate to do that should have been locked, and the only key is in the student council room."

I took a moment to process the problem the student council was facing.

"So, you're telling me that a car was stolen, driven around in a joyride, and then mysteriously vanished, and despite all the cameras on the school grounds you have no idea who did it or where the car went."

At least Ichinose had the decency to look embarrassed.

"The school is furious about it. It was too dark and rainy for the cameras to work properly, and they don't like the idea of a delinquent student who knows how to jimmy a car door and hotwire it." I was sure there were plenty of delinquents like Ryuuen in the grade who might know how, but that didn't make them a suspect. "Besides, it was a teacher's car, so there's a concern it was targeted."

"You're joking, right?"

Ichinose shook her head. "It was Hoshinomiya-sensei's car. She swears she locked the car, and the school believes her, but honestly, I think she might have been a bit careless. It would be just like her." The resigned tone showed just how she felt about the homeroom teacher of Class B. Love and care, because she was their teacher, but fed up with her antics.

And that knowledge made everything make sense. Of course, Hoshinomiya would visit a bottle shop in a storm, not lock her car or take her keys. If there was anyone that careless, it would be her.

I had to admit, privately of course, that she did have good taste in cars.

"The student council is going to have a tough time then."

Ichinose sighed heavily again and rubbed her temples. "It's all a big mess. I didn't think that something this crazy would happen, but I guess anything is possible at this school."

"Well, I can speculate. There's two possibilities for the type of students who stole the car. Either they were so confident in their position at school, or they didn't care anymore."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's likely to be a senior student to start with. It's a huge risk to steal a car, so it'd have to be someone who's gotten the most out of their time here. That's not a guarantee, but it would make the most sense. Then the personality. Either a Class D student, who in this year's third years has nothing left to lose, or a Class A student so full of his ego at being at the top. Although using that reasoning, I'd be hesitant to think it would be 3-A. They're mostly good students, so I'd also investigate 2-A. They were 1-B at the start, so it's more likely to find a student full of themselves for climbing to the top, and getting an ego too big that makes them do this."

Ichinose seemed stunned by my quick analysis. I'd effectively explained why it couldn't be me, and had to be someone the opposite of me, and taken all attention off my class, without even mentioning us.

"That's very impressive Ayanokouji-kun. I hadn't even thought of that."

"Suggest it to the student council. It's no proof of guilt, but it could help narrow down the investigation. Add in the blonde hair, and you should have a narrow pool. Of course, I can't be certain of blonde. I only saw them through a lightening flash very briefly, and any hair would look blonde contrasted against the darkness."

I wondered if she would notice that I had implicated Nagumo on my shortlist. Of course, I hadn't mentioned him myself, so if she came to that realisation, it would be all on her own. The first seeds of doubt sprung in her mind. If there was anyone cocky enough in the school to steal a car, it would be Nagumo.

"Well, thank you for your help. Hoshinomiya-sensei is really distraught by this, so we need to find the person who did it."

I wondered if she would find my presence in the situation suspicious, but it seemed there was absolutely no incriminating evidence. I would have to tell Kikyou later. She was probably still worried despite my assurances.

The conversation lulled for a while, now that Ichinose had

finished her interrogation. The time passed quickly, standing in line, but we didn't have much to talk about. Occasionally Ichinose would raise a new topic, but it quickly became obvious to her that I had no interest in a lengthy discussion about most things. They simply didn't interest me.

I had learned the reason she never showed up at my water shop. Apparently quite a few students in Class B had some spare water, and pooled enough for a decent amount of the class to get by, including Ichinose. Unsurprisingly, they were the class least represented in the sales, and those that had bought some came along early. It was a shame to have missed out on those sales, but I had to commend her classes preparedness.

Soon enough, Amikura and Himeno went into the tent, leaving only one couple in front of us, a couple of third year students.

Once again, I questioned Ichinose on the nature of their relationship, but she didn't seem to know anything. They'd apparently grown close seemingly out of nowhere since the island, and whenever together would always be murmuring to each other, but were rarely together. It was as if they were trying to avoid being seen, Ichinose remarked, but were working on something.

Himeno Yuki. Someone to keep an eye on. If they were working together, and even Ichinose didn't know about it, I would be impressed. But it would make sense for the two of them to see a fortune teller, in an attempt to see their future as a class.

They came out, frowns on their faces and moving as quickly as possible to get away, not even noticing Ichinose calling out to the two of them. Whatever they had been told was disturbing, to say the least, and their minds were completely caught on trying to process it.

It seemed fortune telling might have some merit after all.

The next couple went in, and once they did Ichinose turned to me, starting a conversation again.

"Ayanokouji-kun, whatever is said in there we keep quiet, alright?"

"Eh?" Ichinose seemed really nervous about whatever we would be told or have predicted for us.

"It's... really personal, fortune telling, something I don't want people to know. I'm only going with you because I want to have it done myself, but I need you to promise you won't tell anyone."

It would have been smarter to mention this earlier when we had just lined up, but it seemed Ichinose had gotten cold feet now that we stood in front of the tent.

"Please, promise me. No matter what she says, don't say a word."

"Fine, I promise. The same for me." I had no idea what the

fortune teller would be able to get from me, but I didn't need rumours of my past circulating the school.

Ichinose took a deep breath, calming down from a surprisingly panicked state. Whatever she was worried about was clearly serious to her, but I wasn't going to push just yet. She was far too defensive to break right now.

"Next please."

Lost in thought, I almost didn't notice the voice calling us from inside the tent. Ichinose and I exchanged a nervous look, before stepping inside.

When I entered, I found a chamber that looked like something out of a television show. It was dark inside, probably around 30 lux. The fortune-teller appeared to be an elderly woman, but a hood obscured her face, so I couldn't make out her expression. She sat with a thick book, the contents of which I couldn't guess, and some kind of crystal ball. It looked like one of those balls you chuck around in the hammer throw in track and field.

This was excellent atmosphere.

The crystal ball immediately began to glow, as if it would reflect my and Ichinose's futures. There were two backless seats in front of the fortune-teller. When we sat down, the fortune-teller chuckled lightly and moved her right hand.

"First...you must pay," she commanded.

She pulled out a small card reader from under the table and placed it before us. Such a product of modern civilization felt out of place, especially in contrast to the scene around me. Not that I expected the reading to be free, of course.

"What kind of fortune are you going to read?" asked Ichinose, presenting her student ID card.

"It can be about your academics, career, love life, or anything you like," the fortune-teller answered with an unsettling grin. The expression lent itself nicely to the atmosphere, but she seemed less like a fortune-teller, and more like a witch.

I was very curious about what this witch would come up with particularly with love life, considering that neither Ichinose nor I had any interest in each other.

There was a long list of possibilities, ranging from the cheap basic plan, all the way up to a 50,000 point fortune telling which included things I'd never heard of. Although I had the money, I decided to go with the basic plan for my first time. It wouldn't do to waste money being overwhelmed with information I didn't understand.

It seemed Ichinose was having similar thoughts.

"I'll do the basic plan," she said.

"And you?" asked the fortune-teller.

"I'll take the same," I replied.

It felt as though I was placing an order at a restaurant. I presented my student ID card, and the card reader beeped, indicating that it had deducted points.

"Very well, let's start with the young lady. What's your name?"

"Ichinose Honami," she answered with trepidation.

"When I tell fortunes, I see the face, the hand, and then the heart of the person I'm reading. I may see something that you won't like. Are you prepared for that?" asked the fortune-teller.

"Yes," Ichinose answered instantly, but with a slight waver in her voice. If this really was a cold reading, then the fortune teller would already know she had something to hide.

I saw a bit of the fortune-teller's wrinkled skin under her hood, along with the sharp gleam in her eye. She instructed Ichinose to extend both hands, then revealed her fortune.

"First, a palm reading. You have a long lifeline. You have a long, long life to look forward to, and I do not see any major illnesses in your future."

A typical start. I couldn't imagine that a person could divine such things just by looking at the lines on someone's palm. Maybe the fortune-teller based her readings off personal experiences?

If it were me, I'd simply base my answer on the customer's apparent health. I'd come to a conclusion based on their complexion, build, and so on.

"You have a good potential for academics, a logical and smart mind capable of achieving whatever you put your mind too. You shouldn't face too many troubles with mental challenges.

"An ordinary life is likely to await you, but that is not a terrible thing. I foresee that if you make the safe and right choices, a life of comfort and wealth is in your future, but a boring life it will be." Ichinose looked slightly disappointed at this, but the next prediction was far more concerning.

"However, there will come a time in your future when a choice must be made. A difficult one, one that will decide the fate of your future. Victory or defeat are the only outcomes if you take the chance. A great battle, against incredible power, and if you choose to enter you may have everything you desire or be left with nothing." Ichinose was noticeably pale after this prediction.

But the fortune teller continued and began to delve into territory that seemed to be more specific than I thought possible.

"You had a difficult childhood, I see. Someone important was missing or gone. A parent perhaps?"

"My father," Ichinose barely got out.

"Your father," the fortune teller confirmed. "You changed once he was gone. You aren't proud of this. Things you regret, things you tried to forget lie in this past."

Ichinose was trembling slightly now, but I was more and more impressed with the fortune teller with every word. From an outsiders perspective, I could tell with every word just how the fortune teller was working this out. Guesses and predictions based on past experience, matched with the slight changes and emotions Ichinose was very obviously displaying, made these conclusions reachable. Even I would struggle to cold read someone to this degree of accuracy.

I was getting more and more excited for my turn.

"In love, you will find danger. There is a threat to you, closer than you would think, someone who desires you above all others. If you overcome this hurdle, I foresee you will have a bountiful life, with a truly loving husband and children, but falter, and you will lose yourself to the cruelty of lust."

That seemed a bit out there. When I came, I had expected empty platitudes, playing to the subjects ego, before a small warning. But this was a full analysis, and a true concern for her future.

"There will come a time, soon, very soon, where you have to make a choice. It will be the turning point of your future. Make the right one, and everything you could hope for will come to pass."

The fortune teller leaned backwards, releasing her hands.

"But chose wrong, and either victory or defeat in your chosen path will not matter. You will lose either way."

"Thank you," Ichinose mumbled, her hands shaking from the severe warnings. She was barely paying attention anymore, and hopefully wouldn't hear what I was told.

The fortune teller held her hands out to me, indicating it was my turn. I placed my hands out to her, and she took them and began examining my palms.

"I see... you too will have a long life. A strong powerful one, and I foresee no major illnesses for you either."

Ichinose had perked up slightly at the sound of it being my turn. Annoying, but I couldn't tell her not to listen.

"Your academics, strength, and mind. I see no aspect in where you falter. Truly, I have never met one such as you.

"Whatever you attempt, you will accel at. There is no chance of failure. And yet, I sense you have had a rough childhood. Incredibly rough, more than any I have ever seen..."

I was beginning to feel unnerved by this. It was similar to what happened with Ichinose, and yet I felt a fortune teller should be looking to the future, not the past.

"Boy, what is your name?"

Ah, I had never told her my name.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."

"You, the holder of the fate tenchuusatsu, I'm sorry."

I had never heard that word before, and neither it seemed had Ichinose.

"The what?"

"To put it simply, you've lived a life of constant misfortune since you were born," it was explained. "Although that's an oversimplification. It doesn't necessarily mean that your entire life will be marked by misfortune. It's true that the overall outlook is bad. There are negatives: you won't have the blessing of your parents, or your family. However, the rest is up to you, individually. You alone decide what you can do and can't do," the fortune-teller explained.

That was a slight relief. At least I still held autonomy over my own life, one of the reasons I came to this school. Even if it was all negative, as long as I had my own choices, I was happy.

"You don't need to be pessimistic, and you don't need to act like you're starring in a comedy, either," she continued.

She seemed to have finished her analysis of me, but before I could get up those seedy eyes turned directly on mine once more.

"Boy, your father..."

"What about him?"

"I gave a fortune to a man named Ayanokouji many years ago. His child was destined to suffer more than any other yet grow beyond any limitations."

I narrowed my eyes slightly at this danger. "I would have thought it would be expected of you not to share other people's fortunes." I was sure that man would have been overjoyed at such a fortune.

She took my gaze head-on, an impressive act in and of itself. "I see you have his eyes. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I do hope you find happiness in your life despite the fate tenchuusatsu."

"You would do well not to mention that man to anyone else." I stood to leave this surprisingly knowledgeable woman. "I do not consider what happened to me unfortunate. Don't presume to know me."

Oh, that was it. I was rattled, a feeling I seldom experienced. Someone who knew even something of my past, and was assumed sympathy for me. At least Sakayanagi and Kouenji didn't pretend to understand.

Ichinose stood, still struck by silence at the last exchange, trying to decipher it's meaning. Before we could leave however-

"One piece of advice for the two of you."

We turned back to face the fortune teller, who had risen to match us.

"The two of you are a dangerous combination. I know not what your partnership is, although I suspect you aren't a couple." She smirked at Ichinose's surprised face, although it shouldn't have been hard to tell. Neither of us exhibited any signs of closeness. "The two of you are powerful together. Either you can work to crush your opponents, or one of you will destroy the other. There is no inbetween."

I assumed she knew somewhat how the school worked to be able to present that promise, but it surprisingly made a lot of sense. If Ichinose joined my side, I doubted there would be anyone to rival me left in the school. Her classes unity was strong, and I only had Kikyou to combat it. If Ichinose wasn't an enemy, then there wouldn't be a danger.

If she chose to face me? I would destroy her without sympathy.

The two of us walked outside the tent in silence, and I tried to leave, only to have Ichinose follow me. I led us to a quiet place in the mall where we wouldn't be overheard, before stopping to see what she wanted.

"Ayanokouji-kun, about what the fortune teller said..."

"We agreed to not speak of it."

"We agree to not share it with others. I'm worried about you!" Ichinose had seen through the loophole in our agreement and felt free to confront me.

"I don't need your sympathy." There was no point pretending it wasn't true what the fortune teller had said, in my panic I had given that away.

"And yet I still care. I don't like to think that someone suffered so much."

I pulled myself up to my full height, looking down into Ichinose's eyes.

"If you believe what the fortune teller said, then I'll make you an offer."

"Eh?"

"Join Class D. Work with me and inevitably reach Class A." It was a blatant attempt of sedition, to convince Ichinose to join me and betray Class A.

She smiled bitterly at me. "You know I can't do that, Ayanokouji-kun. Besides, my class is already Class A. I'd be throwing everything away to come to the bottom."

"Then I guess I will crush you."

"Do you really think you can? One person with the most defective class, no offence but it is true, against the might of the new Class A.

Even without your help, we are formidable."

"Did you not hear the fortune teller? I don't think there's a student in this school who can beat me." I opened my eyes, and showed her my true self, all the darkness and emptiness hiding inside of me. Ichinose took a quivering step back instinctively, before I sighed, and hid myself behind my usual nature of indifference.

"Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Consider ourselves enemies, Ichinose. I don't need your pity or sympathy. You made your choice to stand against me. And now, I will destroy you."

Saying that, I walked away to tell Kikyou the news about the car. I was in high spirits. The school had no idea who it was, and I had a very interesting fortune told to me. Perhaps Ichinose would challenge me, absed on the fortune she received, and in the end, I would crush her. I wonder what the choice she was warned about was. Perhaps it was the one I just gave her. I didn't know nor did I care. That was her problem to handle.

I walked away from the empty corner, leaving the shivering terrified girl to the tear running down her face.

Authors Notes:

Credit to Divyanshk for the idea. I was going to skip this story, but after their comment I thought about it and got really into the idea. (P.S. I'd love to see more of your fic if you ever feel like continuing it, it's pretty good.)

Was a lot of fun, and good to bring Ichinose back. Sorry for crushing her, but it was just too satisfying.

As for the fortune teller, i decided to deviate from the books a bit. Made her more accurate, more prophetic of the future. Her knowing AyanoPapa and recognizing the hands is a bit of a stretch, but i felt like it fit just right to add in.

As always, hope you enjoyed, and Merry Christmas!

Arc 5 Chapter 7 - A Day at the Pool

On the last day of holidays, I met in the lobby with the strangest group of people.

Late last night Kikyou had sent me a message, inviting me to go swimming. Although I had already known that some of my classmates were going swimming, I hadn't expected an invite, since the organiser was none other than my sworn enemy Yamauchi.

I exited the elevator into the busy lobby at 8:30, the agreed upon time, only to find I was the last person to arrive.

"Augh, Ayanokouji what the hell are you doing here?!" As expected, Yamauchi objected to my presence, but I was surprised he didn't know I was coming.

"You didn't tell him?" I asked Kikyou.

"Ah, I invited him along, Yamauchi-kun. I hope that's alright?" As expected of the classroom sweetheart, Yamauchi, backed by Ike, instantly took back any complaints they had made about my presence. I could tell they didn't like it, but they dared not go against Kikyou, their shared crush.

"You're late."

And just as predictable, Horikita showed her distain for my presence in a much more effective manner.

"We agreed to meet at 8:30, and here I am."

"You weren't here at 8:30."

I tilted my head slightly in confusion. "Horikita, the time 8:30 is not clearly specified enough to refer to an exact second. In accordance with that ambiguity, my arrival here at 8:30:53 is still within the acceptable range of 8:30 as our meeting time. While I was later than most would expect, I was not, by definition, late for our meeting."

"Social convention, however, would prevail that arriving early to a meeting is expected behaviour, in order to account for any unforeseen delays, such as the traffic in the elevators. Everyone else arrived before 8:30, so that when the approved time came, we would not be late."

As expected, she didn't back down.

"And yet, social convention does not dictate whether I am late or not. Yes, it is expected to be followed, but it is not a rigorous law that must be adhered to. Therefore, there can be no consequences

for violating it. All of this concludes that while I did not arrive when you expected me to, I still arrived at the appropriate time."

"But- "

"Suzune, give it a break. Much as I hate to say it, you won't be able to keep up with this dude."

Sudou came to my defence in order to spare me from what would have been a scathing remark. I could have argued back, but with our stubbornness, we would have remained here all day, and never made it to the pool.

"Fine. Let's get going." A short acceptance from Horikita, and all I was likely to get.

"Yay! Time for a day at the pool," Kikyou exclaimed. Ike and Yamauchi had stars in their eyes as they watched her give a small jump of excitement.

It was an incredibly odd group that made our way down to the pool. Ike and Yamauchi swarmed over Kikyou the entire way, and she replied with just as much entheusiasm. Meanwhile, I was left with Horikita and Sudou, where I inquired to the former why she came.

"I thought it would be a good chance to get along with my class members."

In other words, she took it as an opportunity to network. I was impressed at this decision. It wasn't her idea, having received an invitation from Sudou, but she took the chance for what it was: an opportunity to get the dumbest members in our class on her side.

An entire day wherein she could sway Ike and Yamauchi to support her was a generous offer, and I was pleased to see she was willing to make moves, not just assume that she could stand alone and win.

That was one of the things I liked most about this school. For those invested, there was no moment when you weren't working. Much like a court with intricate politics, every conversation, every outing was a chance to test loyalties, battle with words, to change the ground of upcoming battle. Every moment counted, every conversation had meaning, and there was no chance for a break.

It seemed Horikita had finally recognised this.

"Oh, what's this? Kushida-san, Horikita-san good morning! Oh, and Ayanokouji-kun, hi."

Ichinose had appeared behind us on the path with Amikura and Himeno. Bath towels peaked out of their colourful bags. Her face fell slightly upon seeing me, the conversation we had yesterday fresh in her head.

"Are you heading to the pool too, Ichinose-san?" Ever the diplomat, Horikita gave a very neutral greeting.

"Yes, that's exactly it."

"Ah, why don't you join us, Ichinose-san!" Kikyou took the chance to try and extend her reach into another class even further.

"Oh, I don't know..." Ichinose seemed incredibly reluctant to go in a group with me now. An annoying development, but not unexpected.

"Come on, Ichinose-chan, the more the merrier," shouted Ike.

"Come on Honami-chan, it'll be fun!" With even Amikura pushing, she had no reason to refuse.

"Ah, fine. I'm sure we'll all have a lot of fun," she acquiesced.

"Great!"

And with our group expanded by three, our walk continued on.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, Sudou-kun." Horikita said to me and Sudou "Don't you think this is a little strange?"

"What is?"

"At a time like this, Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun would normally be pushing their luck, right?"

Sudou stiffened when he heard Horikita make that sharp observation. Since he was standing so close, she didn't miss that.

"Did something occur to you, Sudou-kun?" she asked.

"Not really," he muttered. He glanced at me, to which I gave him an almost imperceptible nod, that Horikita luckily missed. Everything would be fine.

That only made Horikita look more guarded. Ike and Yamauchi walked together, shoulder to shoulder, both wearing stiff expressions.

"I can't help but think they have ulterior motives," said Horikita. She focused her attention on the bag that Ike held. "Even though they shouldn't have brought anything with them except towels and swimsuits, that bag looks really heavy."

Ike's bag appeared to weigh more than any of the guys there, myself included.

"Huh, really? Doesn't seem like that to me," replied Sudou nervously.

"It doesn't? Just look at the bag," Horikita pressed.

Horikita's suspicions had merit. The bag swung heavily back and forth when Ike walked, and it strained against his arm.

"It's certainly odd, but can you really comment on it?"

"What are you talking about, Ayanokouji-kun?"

It seemed Horikita hadn't made the final connection. "You can't be seen questioning them. If you have evidence, that's fine, but right now you can't be turning people away from you."

"Yeah, that's right!" Sudou shot me a grateful look. "The whole point of today is to make friends, right? You don't want Ike and

Yamauchi to think you're horrible, do you?"

Horikita sighed. It was a difficult situation to be in, and she was forced to let it play out, not matter how suspicious she was of their intentions.

"Don't worry, Suzune. I'll keep an eye on them," Sudou proclaimed.

"I said you could call me that, but don't wear it out," was the snarky reply Horikita gave.

We made our way to the swimming club's special facility, which adjoined the side of the school building. Since it wasn't part of the main building, we were allowed to enter without wearing our uniforms. It looked as though the pool would be a popular spot, especially considering that this was the last day.

Even before we got to the pool's entrance, students crowded the place. Just as you'd expect from a state-of-the-art school, every grade level had a separate locker room. It was easy to get lost there, but we followed the instructions on a signboard and found our way.

"Right, let's meet up here in 20 minutes!" It was helpful to have someone organised like Kikyou around. I would have expected Ichinose to be the one to take the lead, but she seemed off ever since she joined out little group.

I moved to the boys changing room, following after Ike and Yamauchi, who had quickly sprinted in, yelling to each other in excitement, and Sudou who had followed them to keep them quiet.

I could see them in the far back corner of the changing room muttering over something, and I did my best to stay away. It didn't take long for me to change, since I was only wearing a pair of board shorts. Kikyou had made a very stubborn yet illogical argument as to why I shouldn't wear a rash guard.

Once that was done, I made my way out, leaving the boys to their nonsense. I felt my phone vibrate from a message, but I didn't bother checking it. I was going to have a relaxing day at the pool, and I couldn't care less about what people were messaging me.

I had thought 20 minutes would be a long time to change. I assumed the girls would need that, since going into the pool only required a quick shower for cleanliness, and to get into one's togs. Perhaps girls had more things to do to prepare, but to my surprise Ichinose was already out. Granted, she didn't have to heard moron boys, but it was still an impressively fast.

"Ichinose."

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun, it's you."

Her sunny personality dipped slightly at my presence, and I felt the anger of a hundred glares. There were quite a few students ogling Ichinose, and while she was doing an impressive job of

ignoring them, my presence upsetting her had angered them to a noticeable level.

"There's no need to look so upset. It's obvious you've been trying to avoid me this whole time."

Ichinose smiled bitterly at me. "You made it very clear yesterday. We're enemies, right? And you're going to crush me."

I almost frowned at that. "We're enemies in exams, but I don't see why we can't be friends. Just because I'm going to beat you doesn't mean we can't have any relationship."

Ichinose opened her mouth to respond, a slight smile returning to her face, but before she could-

"Oi Ayanokouji! What's this about a relationship with Ichinose?!"

Ike and Yamauchi bounded up to me, with a slightly subdued Sudou following behind. Obviously, they had only overheard the last part of the conversation, and completely gotten the wrong idea.

"It's nothing to concern yourself over. Besides, don't you have other things to worry about today?" I purposefully taunted them to get their attention away from my conversation with Ichinose.

"Wh-what do you know about it?" Ike stuttered.

"About what? Are you planning something then?" I replied innocently. They were certainly acting suspicious.

"Not at all! Where would you get such a dumb idea from? You really are stupid, Ayanokouji!" Yamauchi battled on. "And what the hell are you doing not wearing a shirt? Cover up or you'll take all the girls from us!"

And instead of thanks from Ichinose for taking the brunt of Yamauchi and Ike's anger, she decided to punish me more instead. It was with a criminal glint in her eyes that she opened her mouth. "I don't know, Ayanokouji-kun looks pretty good. It would be a shame to cover that up."

If Ike or Yamauchi had access to knives, I would have had to fight for my life in that very moment.

For that, Ichinose, I will never forgive you.

Neither would Kikyou for that matter, based on the sickly-sweet glare she was giving off at the buxom strawberry-haired girl as she approached us from behind in a very flattering yellow two-piece. Horikita, Amikura and Himeno followed her closely behind.

"Ichinose-san, you were so quick to change!"

"Ah ha ha! I'm pretty confident in my quick-change abilities," Ichinose boasted, as though that was something to be proud of. Her sunny innocence might just be the secret to her popularity.

There was no hesitation in the eyes of Amikura as she pushed through the group, and it was with a devious grin that she began to poke my chest. "Wow, Ayanokouji-kun, you're really fit. You're

actually kinda hot."

The rage from the two boys behind me had only grown more intense.

"M-Mako-chan, you shouldn't do things like that!" Ichinose, despite having tried to tease me herself, drew the line at prodding another boy's body.

"Hehehe, don't worry Honami-chan, you can have him all for yourself if you want." Kikyou's glare turned onto Amikura at this. "I've got bigger fish to fry. One might even call them a dragon."

She turned around and scanned the pool, before identifying her target relaxing in the water with his subordinates, not far from the edge we were standing at.

"RYUUEN-CHAN!"

The entire population of the pool turned at the shout, only to see a sprinting Amikura ignoring the lifeguards shouting at her, as she ran around and launched herself off the edge directly at the tyrant leader of Class C.

In the eyes of the dragon, for the first time ever, I saw fear, as the demon descended towards him. He made an attempt to move, but it was too late, and Amikura landed directly on top of him, dragging the two of them underwater.

We stood and watched in silence, along with most of the first years there, as the legend of Ryuuen's fear was broken, when he surfaced only to have Amikura hanging onto him around his neck, giggling the entire time. A disgusted look seared onto Ryuuen's face as he used all his strength to pull her off and toss her away, an action which only seemed to redouble Amikura's laughter. There was no victory against such a foe, who found all of your antics amusing.

Thinking about it, if this was her strategy, it was an impressive one. If she could reveal Ryuuen as weak in front of the grade, reveal a soft spot, then his class would fracture. And if he ever attacked her, I was sure Amikura would find a way to record evidence and get him punished.

Amikura was playing a dangerous game. She could come off as clingy, and annoying, which would lose most of the sympathy she had, and in turn hurt Class B.

Or it was possible that she did have a crush on him and was flirting in her own weird way.

Ichinose, used to such antics simply shook her head, and suggested we move away from them. There was a quieter part of the pool on the other side, and we headed in that direction.

Now that Amikura had left, Himeno also took the opportunity to disappear since she wasn't particularly close with any of us,

meaning only Ichinose remained from our additions.

She didn't seem too bothered by it and was doing her best to needle Horikita into a conversation, something the latter obstinately refused to do.

We reached the quiet end of the general-purpose pool, and after lying out our towels, everyone jumped in, with Kikyou taking the center of attention. I was about to follow when a voice called to me from a nearby seat.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun. What a pleasant surprise."

I turned to find that Sakayanagi had sequestered herself here in the shade of a nearby tree, enjoying the scenery. She wore a lovely white summer dress which flicked in the wind, and her black beret perched on her head.

"I'm surprised to see you at the pool. I was under the impression you couldn't swim."

An amused smile crossed her face. "Don't pretend to be stupid, Ayanokouji-kun. I know you too can see what I see. Don't you find it beautiful? This wonderous opportunity we've been given?"

I sighed, before taking a seat in the chair beside her. I assumed it had been reserved for Kamuro, but since she wasn't here, I took it for myself.

"You're right. You can learn a lot from just observing."

"It's a wonderous symphony. A chess board where no one knows the rules. And yet, when studied, you can learn more than you ever could in a classroom."

Sakayanagi was here for the sole purpose of spying on other students. From her position, she could look out into the sea of students, and observe. For someone of her calibre that was all it took. The way students interacted, who was playing with whom, who disliked whom, how fit were students. Enormous amounts of information was being absorbed by the child genius, and no one knew any better.

By the end of the day, Sakayanagi would have an understanding of not just our grade, but most of the school. There were hundreds of students here for her to observe, to witness the great performance unfurling. Every action, every interaction meant something. From this, Sakayanagi would know the grade without having to speak to a single person.

Of course, it had limitations. This was only one day, with only a few hours of observation. But the baseline information would be invaluable, and overtime patterns would emerge, and it would be a simple task to predict what our fellow classmates did.

"Would you care for a game of chess, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I was pulled out my thoughts by the quiet question from

Sakayanagi. Unlike usual, she seemed almost reserved asking this, as if it was special to her. I suppose it was, as chess seemed to be an important game, and we had not yet had a chance to play.

"I suppose so. Do you have a board?"

"Fufufu, neither of us are as pathetic as needing a crutch, although I would be willing to have a game with my marble set in my dorm room one day."

While it was true that we didn't need one, there was something special about moving the pieces yourself, and seeing it play out before you, not just in your mind.

"Very well. You can play white."

Sakayanagi laughed quietly to herself. "How generous to offer me a handicap. Very well, e4."

"c5." Neither of us turned out attention away from the performance before us, nor did we let it distract us from the game.

"A Sicilian. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Knight f3."

"d6"

"d4"

"Pawn takes pawn."

"Knight takes pawn."

"Knight f6"

"Knight c3"

"a6"

It was my last move that amused Sakayanagi the most. "A Najdorf? I should have expected you to play something so respected."

I sighed. "I've never understood the need to specialise in only a few openings or favour a certain style. I play what I feel like."

"Fufufu, but not everyone is capable of memorising the first 20 lines of every opening there is. Even at the highest level, Grandmasters need to study."

"Should they not just play the best move then?"

Sakayanagi pulled a queen out of her pocket and began to twirl it in her fingers. "Most people cannot calculate like a computer, nor should they. The innovation from a human player is always far beyond what a computer can comprehend. That said, you are capable of doing both, something even I've never seen before."

"You're disappointed," I realised.

A smile. "I had hoped to use this game to understand you better. What sort of a person are you? How do you think? But I should have realised the masterpiece would simply play the perfect move every time." Sakayanagi paused, considering her options. The game had devolved from an attempt to analyse me into a simple chess game. "I, for instance, have maybe three good moves according to

modern theory."

"Bishop e2, e3 or g5"

"Which would you play Ayanokouji-kun?"

I thought about it for a bit. "Bishop to e3 is a solid move, and the best out of the three. It's scored well in past matches, and I've always favoured it myself."

"Exactly right," Sakayanagi smirked. "And yet, despite being so solid, I will always play Bishop g5, the most aggressive of the three."

"But after e6, f4, Qb6, Nb3, Be7 black has virtually equalised," I protested. There were only two moves that gave an advantage to white, both negligible.

"And yet, I will continue to play aggressively." Sakayanagi gave me a knowing look. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with Bg5. The loss from aggression is negligible."

She wasn't wrong about the position. Bishop to e3 or g5, there was little difference to someone who knew the theory perfectly. It was when the theory diverged, and novelty moves were played, that Sakayanagi's nature of aggression would come to light. And that was when I would continue to play the best move in the position, because that was what I had trained to do.

"Unfortunately, this conversation has spoiled the game for me," Sakayanagi complained with a sour look. "Perhaps we can play again some other time, leaving the philosophical debates out."

"That does sound more enjoyable."

I looked around and saw Kamuro on her way back with a couple of drinks in hand, an annoyed expression on her face.

"I should go. My friends are missing me." In fact, every now and then Kikyou had turned around and given me a wave. Clearly, she wanted me to get in the pool.

"Hm?" Sakayanagi looked around and noticed what I had seen. "Fufufu I think you better had, or face Masumi-san's wrath."

"Enjoy your day, Sakayanagi."

"Fufufu, I will. It's about to get a lot more interesting."

"Eh?"

I turned around to where she was looking, only to find a blond-haired boy strutting his way towards me, a flock of girls following and cheering for him.

Nagumo Miyabi had finished showing off at volleyball it seemed and had decided I was to be his entertainment for the day.

"Well, if it isn't Ayanokouji!"

Everyone around us went quiet at his proclamation, watching as he made his way slowly towards me.

I wasn't surprised that he had singled me out. Nagumo had a

reputation to protect, and I was an unknown danger. This was an easy opportunity for him to get a read on my skills.

"Nagumo."

The viper grinned at me. "You should show more respect to the Vice President of the Student Council."

"I'll show you the respect I think you've earned."

It was a blatant act of disrespect, in front of multiple people. My own group of friends had gotten out of the water and come over to see what was going on.

"Careful there, Ayanokouji. You wouldn't want to make me angry, now, would you?"

I was about to respond with something equally as aggravating when laughter could be heard from behind me.

"Fufufu Nagumo-senpai, you aren't even worthy of his attention." Sakayanagi, fearless as ever pulled herself up and marched up to Nagumo, staring up at his eyes, yet managing to stare him down somewhat. Even so, Nagumo didn't give up.

"Sakayanagi Arisu. I've heard impressive things. It would be a shame for you to fall down this early. After all, someone of your... stature should know the consequences of speaking ill of their betters."

A sharp intake of breath could be heard at the insult. Neither of us were affording Nagumo the respect he deserved, but it was an important power play. At this very moment, boundaries were being drawn, standing was being publicised. Backing down now was tantamount to a complete loss.

Sakayanagi returned a cold glare and a deadly smile. "To think you have to target a handicap to feel superior. And after all the good I had heard about the Vice President, it turns out he's just a petulant child who wants his way."

Nagumo, to his credit, simply laughed off the insult, stepping back with his hands in his pockets, the picture of relaxed. "Fine, fine. How about a challenge then. Ayanokouji, you and I in volleyball."

"And what would be the point of that? I have no interest in a half-hearted game."

"Oh, but where's the fun in that? Half a million-point wager sounds fair, doesn't it? And both of us will try our best."

This was an important charade that we had to play out, and Nagumo had cooperated perfectly. To most people it would seem like I was lazy and Nagumo was desperate, but we both understood the necessity of this act.

If someone lost, it would have been very easy to soften the defeat by claiming we didn't try, that we were studying the other and

simply didn't care. By goading each other to put stakes on the line, we no longer had an excuse to play hooky.

"I assume we will play in teams. Volleyball isn't a one-person game, after all."

Nagumo laughed. "Of course. Each of us can choose a representative for our teammate."

There were some hopeful looks from the crowd that had followed Nagumo over, both boys and girls seeking his favour, but his gaze blurred over them, before landing onto one resting figure.

"Kiryuuin. Get over here, you're on my team."

Kiryuuin Fuuka, who had been lazing on a seat nearby, lifted her head up very slightly, before lying back down completely ignoring his request. A giggle could be heard emanating from the first years, and I suspect originating from Kikyou, at the embarrassment.

Nagumo once again wasn't fazed. "Kiriyama then." The second year Kiriyama walked out from the crowd and stood beside Nagumo. "Come on then, Ayanokouji. Don't disappoint me."

I looked around at the various students surrounding us, pretending to decide who I would have join me. This was a high stakes game, and while on my own I was confident I could 2v1, having an incompetent partner would only lead to them being targeted. Finally, I settled on the perfect person.

"Kiryuuin."

At my voice, she lifted her head again, but unlike her actions before, she got up fully and walked over to stand at my side.

I could visibly see Nagumo grinding his teeth at the embarrassment, but there was nothing he could do.

"I'm honoured by your faith in me, Kouhai-kun. Let's take down blondie."

Ever the confident man, Nagumo smiled, before turning and walking back to the volleyball nets in the pool. The crowd parted for us, and Kiryuuin and I followed behind.

There was a large group gathering around the pool, all here to watch our game. I estimated up to a hundred students were watching, and I was sure the story of this game would be spread throughout the school in the next few days. I had no choice but to win.

"Ayanokouji-kun, a moment?"

It was Ichinose, who had come up to me. I turned to her, curious to what she had to say.

"You made some bold claims yesterday. I wonder if you can live up to them," she asked with a smile.

"Do you really thing I'll have to try?" I honestly asked. I was curious about her opinion on Nagumo's capabilities. Unfortunately,

Ichinose took my question as a slight.

"You underestimate him. He's the Vice President for a reason." Her loyalty was impressive, although possibly clouded by her own aspirations.

"And you overestimate him. I guess I'll go all out then, if only to prove your faith is misplaced."

"Are you ready, Kouhai-kun?" Kiryuuin called from behind me.

"I'll be watching for your loss, Ayanokouji-kun. I've already bet against you."

I shook my head. Ichinose was truly deluded, caught up in the grandeur of the student council, and the man who got her in. She truly thought he was above everyone in the school, even Manabu. It was time to burst that bubble.

"Good luck Kiyotaka!" I heard a shout from Kikyou, which I ignored, wading my way into the water.

Nagumo grinned at me, before throwing the ball over to our side. "I'll let you serve first."

Kiryuuin cackled. "What a stupid mistake." She passed the ball to me.

I had said I would go all out, hadn't I?

The rules were simple. A best of three sets, and first to fifteen won the set. I could see numerous students debating the result and heard quite a bit of betting going on. 4:1 or even 5:1 odds were mentioned for me. I glanced at Kikyou, and with a nod she knew what to do. This was an easy profit.

The first set was murder.

If you won the point, you were allowed to serve again. Which led to me doing a perfect serve over and over again, directly at Nagumo. No matter where he was on his side of the net, I targeted his face with the ball from a perfect jump, at a speed which he barely managed to deflect away, let alone control.

Twice, he managed to knock it up for Kiriyama to set it, only to have his spike blocked completely by Kiryuuin.

We won the first set 15-0.

The crowd around the edge of the pool was growing restless at this point. There was no competition, and almost everyone had thought it was a sure game for Nagumo or would at least be close. There were many upset students who were worried at losing a lot of points.

Kiryuuin, though, was having a wonderful time, taking every opportunity to insult Nagumo. This situation had been his idea, and yet it was turning into a public humiliation, and Kiryuuin was only exacerbating it.

Not willing to back down, Nagumo took the ball to serve for the

second set and launching it in the air slammed it towards the farthest spot from me. I was impressed that his ego allowed him to strategies that way, and didn't simply target me, but now I had to focus on Kiryuuin.

It was difficult for her, but she successfully received the serve, knocking it to me, where I knocked it up, and allowed Kiryuuin to slam it down across the net, where Kiriyama hit it, but uncontrolled, and the ball flew away into the crowd.

That meant that we won the first point.

It also meant that it was Kiryuuin's serve. And she took great pleasure in bullying Kiriyama, her own classmate.

"You really don't like him, do you?" I remarked at one point as Kiryuuin retrieved the ball for another serve.

"Ha! Kiriyama is a sell-out coward. Too afraid to stand up to Nagumo. I have no respect for such a pathetic man." She spoke loudly enough that Kiriyama heard what she said, I suspected intentionally.

And the slaughter continued. Now that Kiryuuin was serving, even though she was targeting the inferior Kiriyama, he was still able to return it occasionally. A few rallies were held, but in the end Nagumo wasn't able to score a single point.

Kiryuuin and I had won a perfect game.

There was silence from around the pool. No one dared to be the first to cheer, not in the face of Nagumo's crushing defeat. They weren't brave enough to get on his bad side.

In the end, the reverberating laughter came from Nagumo himself.

"You really are amazing, Ayanokouji! Hahaha, that was impressive. Don't worry, I'll be taking a *personal* interest in you from now on."

Nagumo was trying desperately to save face, something I wouldn't allow. "Go ahead. But like I said at the beginning, you aren't worth my time."

A quiet "fufufu" was heard wafting over the heads of everyone. That broke the final restraint, and a loud cheer could be heard, as everyone celebrated the unexpected outcome.

I could see Kikyou and some other girls from our class cheering for me, although it seemed Ike and Yamauchi had left, probably fed up with the attention I was getting. Horikita and Sudou were standing off to the side, both with surprised and impressed expressions on their faces. Clearly even they hadn't expected the result. To be fair though, it was rather unbelievable.

Kiryuuin held up her hand for a high-five, to which I simply stared at until she sighed, and clambered out of the pool and went

back to her deck chair, kicking off the poor first-year who had taken her spot.

Already though, the excitement was beginning to die down. Nagumo had left, recognising he had no reason to stay anymore, and people were beginning to get back into the pool and play their own water games. In order to get out of the way, I swam over to the side of the pool, and pulled myself out, ending up next to a shocked and awestruck Ichinose. To see her idol so easy destroyed would be heartbreaking, and coupled with my threat to her, she should be appropriately afraid.

As I passed her, I simply whispered in her ear, "overrated," ignoring the flinch she gave in response.

I walked over to where a beaming Kikyou was waiting, and she passed my phone back, only for multiple notifications of points transfer to come through. Nagumo had paid up, and Kikyou had made almost a million points herself by betting on me to win. People were offering ridiculous odds, enforced by a valid school contract.

"Congratulations, Kiyotaka-kun! I never doubted you for a second!"

"Fufufu, indeed. An impressive showing, Ayanokouji-kun." Sakayanagi had appeared out of nowhere, flanked as always by Kamuro. "This has been most... enlightening." Her eyes flickered to Kikyou, which got her an uncomfortable look in response. "I'll be seeing you around for our chess game. Let's go Masumi-san."

Sakayanagi slowly walked off, and Kamuro followed, without giving me her usual insult. Perhaps she was finally warming up to me.

I transferred Kiryuuin half the points as she probably expected, before allowing myself to be dragged into the pool with Kikyou. The water in here was just as temperate as the sports pool, and I allowed myself to simply float in the water, ignoring the people who kept trying to talk to me.

"Sakayanagi-san is really scary, huh?" Kikyou remarked.

I shrugged, as best as one could in water. "She's probably the biggest threat in our grade. You should be careful around her." It was a pointless warning, as I was sure Kikyou already knew this.

"Yes, but it's a strange feeling. It's like she sees right through you. I don't know, she just terrifies me." She couldn't say it out loud, but I got the message. Kikyou was scared that Sakayanagi knew about her darker side.

"I wouldn't worry about it. Sakayanagi isn't one to act rashly, and I'm sure whatever she can come up with, you can counter."

The only real plan to stop Kikyou was to expose her. That was

something that would never happen with evidence, because Kikyou would never slip up again, and if there wasn't evidence, there wasn't a social attack that could ever hurt her.

"I suppose you're right."

The conversation lulled, and I simply enjoyed floating in the water with my best friend. I was sure there would be people jealous of me, but I ignored them. I had won a victory and was now basking in the rewards.

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They day passed rather quickly after the excitement, and it didn't feel all that long before the pool began to shut. At this point, Kikyou had drifted away from me and gone to play with some other friends, leaving me to float in the water. It wasn't quite sensory deprivation, what with all the noisy students around, but it was therapeutic in a way.

I got a message on my phone from Kikyou explaining that she was going for ice-cream with a few friends, and would be over later tonight, meaning I would have to find my way back alone.

But that was fine. I still had one more meeting to attend to.

"Did you manage it?" I asked aloud.

To anyone watching I must have seemed crazy, talking to myself. There was no one in sight anywhere near me, but then again there was no one else around at the pool. Everyone else had either left, or was changing, and only the lifeguards were left, cleaning up after the day. And yet, I could sense the presence of someone hiding in the shadows.

Matsushita came out, an impressed look on her face. "How did you know I was there?"

"You should be proud of your stalking skills. No one else would be able to notice you." She really was talented when it came to not being seen, one of the reasons I had given her this task.

Matsushita walked up beside me, palming off an SD card superstitiously while doing her best to act natural. She really was playing up the secret agent role.

"Do I even want to know how you found out about this?"

"Does it matter? You stopped it." My casual response drew an unimpressed glare from the spy-in-training.

"It's disgusting, and I have no doubt that they'll try again. And next time, you might not be able to find out about it."

I sighed. Matsushita had a point, but my decision on what to do was already made. There were too many benefits to give in to the wiles of a scared teenage girl, no matter how right she was.

"What do you suggest I do then?" Here, I could test her. I could find out what this girl, who was living a lie, really wanted, and

what she was willing to do to get it.

"Deal with it."

"A worthless answer."

"Ensure it doesn't happen again," she tried. Still wrong, but an improvement.

"A pathetic answer, and a pathetic attempt to avoid responsibility." I turned to her, staring her right in the eyes. "You are the one who wants this resolved, so what do you think I should do, Matsushita?"

Her hands were pale from the nails digging into them. Frustration was etched across her face as she was forced to answer things she didn't want to.

"Why are you asking me this? You already know what has to be done."

"And yet, I want to hear you say it."

I stepped towards her, and she flinched as I towered over her. Despite her intelligence and good looks, in this moment Matsushita had nothing, and we both knew it. Which was why I was surprised to see her resolve return, confidence and strength returning to her after only a moment's hesitation.

"They need to be expelled."

I stepped back, satisfied with the answer. It was the only solution for such a problem, but it took a lot of bravery to condemn one's classmates. It was that determination that I was looking for.

"What is it that you want in this school, Matsushita?"

"Ice-cream usually goes well with a day at the pool."

"I don't much care for facetiousness. Answer the question."

Matsushita sighed. It seemed she had been looking forward to some wordplay. "You're no fun. Fine, I want to get to Class A."

"And what are you willing to do to get there? Because this won't be the last time, we have to cast off some of our number. Can you look your best friend in the eye and betray them?"

Matsushita stepped away from me and walked towards the pool, unwilling to look at me during this difficult conversation.

"What do you want me to say, Ayanokouji-kun? That I want to get to Class A more than I care about my friends? Because honestly, I don't know."

"Good job." She lifted her head up slightly at my words of praise, but still didn't face me. "That was the only answer I would have accepted." She still didn't look at me. "Turn around," I ordered.

Matsushita took a moment longer, but eventually I could once again see her brilliant blue-violet eyes. There was no better way to understand a person's mind than through their eyes. There was a reason they had been labelled the window to the soul. Within one's

eyes you could tell their true intent. It was almost impossible to hide a lie that way.

Within hers, I saw conflict. Desire to achieve her goals, fear for her friends, but most importantly, fear for what she could do. It was only natural to be terrified of your own potential, and Matsushita was on the precipice.

She stood on the edge of a cliff, with the power to reach her goals right in front of her. But to do so would risk everything she cared for. Could she reach out and take it, or would she falter? Those were questions for another day. For now, I had enough of torturing the poor girl.

"I won't ask you to answer today. You've done well, and don't worry I'll deal with the rest of this."

Matsushita began to walk away, before stopping, seemingly regaining her confidence. "What's your goal, Ayanokouji-kun? You're asking me to make sacrifices to get what I want, but I don't even know if you will deliver."

"You think I can't achieve whatever I attempt?"

"I think you're fully capable to manage anything. I don't know if you care enough to reach Class A." So, she noticed my evasion. As expected.

"Don't worry yourself, Matsushita. Work with me and you'll reach your goal."

I hadn't answered her question, and Matsushita was very aware of this, but she let it slide. She now knew how I worked, and after she got through this conundrum, I would know how much I could rely on her.

"Out of curiosity, are you not even the slightest bit concerned with giving me this?" I held up the SD card. Matsushita, knowing exactly what I was holding, should have had some concerns.

Surprisingly though, she just shrugged. "I have a problem with those boys having it. They're just disgusting perverts that think with their... other parts. You, on the other hand..." She gave me a searching look. "I don't understand you. I don't think you're even interested at what's on that SD card."

"Are you so confident in that? The purity and dignity of multiple girls is at stake." Despite my continued warnings, Matsushita showed no sign of changing her beliefs.

"You had every chance with Kushida-san two nights ago. If even that didn't tempt you, I don't see why this would. Besides," and she flashed me a grin here, "you've got much better uses for that than being a horny pervert, I'm sure."

She had me there.

"You can do what you want, but I'm heading back to the dorms

now. Think about what I've said Matsushita. It would be... regrettable if you remained useless to our class."

A narrowed stare was thrown back at me, giving nothing away. After a few moments I got a positive response. "I guess I've done some private studying over the holidays. I'm sure my grades will go up with a bit of work."

"Congratulations."

Matsushita didn't reply, instead taking the chance to walk off and leave me by the pool. The conversation had soured near the end, but I didn't think it would be enough to drive her away. It would take a while, and a bit of soul searching, but I was sure Matsushita would become a person I could rely on.

After a while, the lifeguards forced me to leave, and after showering and changing back into my clothes, I began the quiet walk back to school. By now, everyone else was gone, already home for an early night before the first day of school.

As I walked, I felt my phone buzz. Pulling it out, I saw a message from Sudou, a simple emoticon thumbs-up. Clearly, the plan had worked, and the subterfuge been discovered.

He had contacted be a few days ago and told me about the plan. It was clearly weighing heavily on him, since what they were going to do was illegal. And so, remembering the consequences of what happened with Sakura, and not wanting something similar to happen to Horikita, he reached out to me for help.

I was certainly impressed by this. The Sudou from the start of the year would certainly have gone along with the plan, but he had matured significantly since then. Not wanting to lose his standing with Horikita, paired with a deeper understanding of the severity of such an action, had resulted in him asking me to stop Ike and Yamauchi's plan. He couldn't stop them himself, but he had made them promise to not try again, and so there wouldn't be a reoccurrence.

It was a clever idea, but unlike him, I didn't have faith that they wouldn't try again. Those two had tried to look at MY Kikyou in the girls changing room. They were a problem, and despite the guarantees I had given Sudou that nothing would happen, I of course had lied with every word.

Ike and Yamauchi were a problem that had to be dealt with. Sudou simply didn't accept that. But it was time to do what had to be done. If he fell for my lies and believed I would forgive them, then that was his own mistake.

I was so lost in thoughts, that I almost didn't notice when I reached my dorm. I entered, only to find that Kikyou was already inside, lounging on my bed like she owned the place.

"You're late," she accused.

"I'm the host in this situation. I can hardly be accused of being late."

I dropped my wet things in the bathroom, before returning to the kitchen to begin working on dinner. This was the last day of holidays, so something simple was called for. Looking in my fridge there weren't a lot of options.

"How does Chicken Tonkatsu sound?"

That got a smile. "Ah, that'd be great. Chicken's always amazing after a long day."

I began to prepare the meal, while Kikyou continued to babble on about her day. I had been there for most of it, but as expected nothing of interest had happened. I perked up though when she mentioned Sakayanagi.

"Hey, do you think the flat bitch really saw through my act?"

I thought about it but discarded the thought almost instantly. "No, Sakayanagi is much more interested in me. She was most likely trying to figure out our relationship. You as a person, I doubt she cares too much for."

It was a white lie. Sakayanagi would of course show interest in the one person holding Class D together, but Kikyou didn't need to know about that. The rest was probably true. Sakayanagi had no reason to doubt Kikyou's acting. She'd improved markedly since she had first gotten a chance to vent to me, and even before that, her disparities were nigh unnoticeable.

"Ah, that's a relief. You better fuck her up alright? She scares me."

I plated up dinner, and we both sat down at the table. "Don't worry, I'll deal with Sakayanagi eventually." I was curious to see how Sakayanagi dealt with the rest of the grade. We both seemed to have a mutual understanding to leave the other till last.

Dinner was a quiet affair, both of us tired from the day at the pool. With school tomorrow, it was important to get a good night's sleep. Only once the term had started in earnest, could bad habits be allowed to slip back in.

"Thanks for coming to the pool today, Kiyotaka. It's... fun hanging out with you." I felt she had something more to say, but instead Kikyou got up and made to leave. Unfortunately...

"Hey, Kiyotaka, did you lock the door?"

The door wouldn't open.

"No, I didn't. It should just open."

Kikyou jiggled the handle angrily. "Well, it isn't, ok?"

I sighed and got up to check. To my horror, the door really didn't open. It was as if it was locked from the outside, although that shouldn't be possible. The doors in the school used magnetic locks,

only disabled by either the key card on the outside, or by opening it from the inside. Something must have malfunctioned.

"I guess we're stuck in here," I casually observed, but it seemed Kikyou was panicking more and more.

"You can't be serious!"

I pulled out my phone and called the concierge, while Kikyou walked around panicking. They answered luckily but informed me that they wouldn't be able to open the door until tomorrow morning.

I informed her of the bad news, and by now she had calmed down somewhat.

"Ok. So, I'm stuck here for the night then."

I gestured to my wardrobe. "You're welcome to borrow a shirt."

"Oh? You think I'm going to get changed here?" Kikyou, unlike most girls, didn't become a quivering mess of embarrassment, and instead stood strong. The only hint that she felt any different was the light blush on her cheeks.

In response I made an obvious move to look her up and down. "You're welcome to sleep in that, but I doubt it would be very comfortable."

"Hmm, you have a point." After considering it for a moment, Kikyou marched over to my wardrobe and pulled out one of my shirts, before walking into my bathroom and shutting the door. "Come in if you want."

I ignored Kikyou's teasing and cleaned up dinner. Halfway through the washing up, I heard the shower running. I was surprised at that, since she should have showered after the pool, but it didn't really bother me. As long as her hair was dry and didn't make anything wet.

I had showered after my meeting with Matsushita, and so I was comfortable getting into my pyjama pants. I had just finished cleaning up the apartment and had sat down on my bed when Kikyou finally came out of the bathroom. The water had finished running a while ago, so I assumed she'd been drying her hair.

She walked out wearing only my shirt and her yellow underwear that I saw flash for just a second from below as she walked towards me. I had never appreciated until this moment just how impressive Kikyou's thighs were. Usually outshined by her breasts, which even now were accentuated by my shirt, they were clearly obvious as her bare legs moved towards me.

"Finished staring?" Kikyou said, with one eyebrow raised at me.

"You don't want to put on any pants?"

"Do you want to put on a shirt?"

"Touche."

At some point we had mutually assumed that we would be sharing my bed. I wasn't going to give up my bed, and I was confident that Kikyou would refuse to sleep on the ground. There was enough room for us both anyway.

I lay down in bed and rolled away and felt the warmth of another person lying against my bad. The aircon was on the right temperature, so I pulled the blanket up and tried to fall asleep.

"Hey, Kiyotaka."

"Hm?"

"Could you... turn around please?"

It was a strange request, but I had no reason to comply. I rolled around, doing my best not to pull the blanket with me, until I was on my side facing Kikyou. Our faces were only a couple of centimeters apart, and even in the darkness I could see the embarrassment on her face.

I waited for her to say something, but when nothing was forthcoming, I closed my eyes to sleep. The moment I did, as if she had been waiting for it, Kikyou rolled over and wrapped her arms around me.

"Eh?"

"Please... just let me."

I considered it. Thought it over. And in the end...

"Fine."

I wrapped my arms around Kikyou in return, and rolled slightly into a more comfortable position, with Kikyou resting on my chest. So much more than before, I could feel her pressing against me. The warmth of another person, not just emotionally, but physically. I held my arms a bit tighter, trying to pull Kikyou closer to me. I could feel a smile on her face against my chest. Just like I had told her on the rooftop months ago.

She was mine.

"I have a present for you tomorrow."

"Hm?" She was barely awake, but enough to understand what I was saying.

"You'll just have to wait and see."

"I'm looking forward to it," she mumbled, before succumbing to sleep.

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I woke up the next morning, only to find that Kikyou had curled up next to me, clutching my arm to her chest.

The sun was streaming lightly in through the window, in the bright orange of the morning. It was pretty early still, but the knocking on the door disrupted me from my thoughts.

I slowly extracted myself from Kikyou and climbed out of bed,

pulling on a shirt before answering the door. Surprisingly, it worked, and I opened it to find a contractor standing there. Luckily, the bed was obscured from the door, so the school wouldn't find out that Kikyou had stayed the night. I wasn't sure what the rules were for just sleeping, and the extenuating circumstances would probably work in our favour, but I didn't want to be expelled over this.

The contractor explained to me that the key card mechanism had been damaged, probably by an accident in the hall, and that was why the door couldn't be opened. He'd repaired it, free of cost of course, and now that was done, I waved him off. He was looking quite tired this early in the morning, and I was sure he'd go and find a coffee somewhere.

I tested the door a few more times, and satisfied that it worked, returned to my dorm to wake Kikyou. Today was the first day of school for the semester, and Kikyou had to be up and gone early so she wasn't seen. The rumours from that would destroy her, and there wasn't much she could do to stop it posthumously.

I gave her a light shove and called her name a few times. The bleary-eyed girl slowly blinked awake, before going slightly red upon realising where she was.

"What's going on?"

"You need to get going. It's early, but I'm sure you don't want to get caught."

She blinked at my words for a few seconds while her brain kicked into gear.

"Oh. Right."

Kikyou got up and quickly started to gather her things, before heading to the door. There was an odd feeling in the room, as she fled in the early hours of the morning carrying her clothes. Before she opened the door, Kikyou turned around and threateningly pointed at me.

"No one ever knows about this."

"Don't worry, I value my continued existence."

"Good. And anyway... thanks," she muttered.

"Get going. It's already 6:00"

"Right."

And with that, Kikyou scurried out of the room closing the door behind her. I sighed. Today was going to be a troublesome day. Pulling out my phone, I began to make a call, while opening up my laptop to do some last-minute work.

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Walking into class was a novel experience. We had received 69,000 points each this morning, and I had received my extra points from Ryuuen as per our contract. Based on his deal with

Class A, it shouldn't hurt him too much.

Everyone was excited, talking in noisy groups about what they would be buying. Prior to the holidays, we were only getting 20,000. Our income had more than tripled

I walked over to Sotomura, who was sitting alone as usual. "Is this what you were looking for?" I handed him the thing he had asked me for on the cruise ship.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-dono. Yes, this will be the perfect addition to my investigation. I appreciate the continued support of my patron."

"Don't mention it."

I moved away from him and took my seat at the back of the classroom, looking forward to the excitement of the day.

It wasn't long before Chabashira walked in, an angry look on her face. Unluckily for the class, not many people noticed

"Everyone sit down! I have a lot of bad news for you all."

That got it done. Everyone was very quickly in their seats, awaiting impending doom.

"Firstly, if anyone knows about a car being stolen three nights ago, please inform the school. It's a serious issue, and if the perpetrator is caught, they will be expelled."

I was already confident they had nothing, and Kikyou didn't even flinch.

The rest of the class tried to begin a discussion on it, but Chabashira smacked her desk with a ruler.

"Shut up! Next, Ike and Yamauchi. Stand up."

The room was deathly silent, and the two of them stood up, legs trembling. They knew what they had done, but clearly, they hadn't even considered the chance of failure as an option.

"For completely disgusting perversion and breach of privacy, the two of you are expelled from Advanced Nurturing High School. You will wait the rest of the day in the staff room, and then clean out your dorms tonight, before being escorted off campus."

"Wha..."

"Noooo! What are you talking about sensei?!"

Neither of them could believe it. Ike fell to his knees, trembling and shaking, while Yamauchi began to yell.

"You're lying sensei! What the hell are you talking about, I didn't do anything! It was Ike, I wasn't involved at all!"

Yamauchi instantly threw Ike under the bus.

"Because of your expulsion, Class D will lose 50 Class Points for each of you. For the rest of you, our new standing is at 690 Class Points."

And that was another reason why Chabashira was so upset. It wasn't a huge loss, not unrecoverable, but it still hindered us. That,

and their depraved activities that both I and Matsushita had testified to early this morning.

Kikyou was looking over at me with stars in her eyes, realising this was the gift I had promised her. Her two worst nightmares in our class were gone.

"Wait what the hell?" "You two idiots what did you do!" "You bastards are hurting the class even more!"

The entire class had turned on Ike and Yamauchi, the former who was a quivering ball of tears on the ground, the latter was yelling and screaming.

"Ha! Get out of my sight you disgusting creatures."

"Shut up Kouenji! You bastard, don't even talk to me!"

Even Kouenji was done with the two boys. He had previously had no regard for them, but now he was actively targeting the two of them. To the rest of the class, that was the sign of a new low social standing.

"Sensei, what did they do. Is there any way to appeal it?" Hirata as ever was the voice of reason. Horikita however, was looking at me, realising it was to do with what she had noticed yesterday.

"They didn't, did they?"

I simply nodded.

"I cannot tell you Hirata, as a matter of privacy."

"Be honest, Chabashira. They tried to film the girls changing room yesterday."

I raised my voice over the class, and everyone went quiet.

"Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun... is this true?" Kikyou did her best to ask them holding in tears.

Before they could answer though, Sudou interrupted.

"Oi, Ayanokouji! You said they wouldn't get in trouble! I asked you for help, and you said you'd stop it without anyone knowing!"

"You! You betrayed us Sudou!" Pure rage filled Yamauchi's eyes as he launched himself at Sudou. Sudou though, didn't even notice, and just brushed the boy to the side where he collapsed in the corner.

"Did you really believe me? Why would I save useless people like them? You're too naïve, Sudou. Ike and Yamauchi are acceptable losses. Although I'm impressed that you did the right thing."

At this, many of the girls in the class began to look at Sudou in a new light. Before this, he was a friend of the perverts, but now he was an accessory to stopping their terrible actions.

"Acceptable losses?"

This time it was Hirata to interrupt the conversation, and the rest of the class went quiet.

"Don't tell me you're going to defend them, Hirata?" Horikita took

a chance to pull Hirata down. The class unity was collapsing.

"QUIET!" The argument was broken up by Chabashira. "You can debate this all you want after class. Ike and Yamauchi, get out. NOW!" There was an anger in her eyes like never before. She had disliked us, despised us, but never been so angry. Understandably, this had crossed a line.

The two boys slowly picked themselves up, and all the fight had drained out of them. This was the end for the two of them, and we watched in silence as the pathetic beings dragged themselves out of the room, tears and snot running down their faces.

Now that Ike and Yamauchi were gone from the room, Chabashira began to teach our first lesson of the morning, not allowing any more debate. Superstitiously, I pulled out my phone and sent a message. Conversation would have to wait until lunch.

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Once the bell rang for lunch, the entire classroom devolved into arguments. Luckily no one was defending the boys, but they were arguing for the sake of arguing now.

I did my best to sneak out of the classroom but was noticed at the last second.

"Oi, Ayanokouji where the hell are you going?! Why the fuck didya rat on Ike and Yamauchi?!"

Sudou ambushed me on the way out.

I shrugged. "Ask Matsushita. She helped me stop them." The entire class instinctively turned towards the girl in question who stared at me with angry eyes, but I took the opportunity to make my escape.

I didn't have to wait long outside before Karuizawa joined me.

"So, what did you want?"

"Not here. Follow me."

I walked off, and after a moment, Karuizawa followed horridly.

"Oi, where are we going? At least tell me that."

I sighed. "We're going to the dorms, to pick up something important."

"Like what?" She was asking a lot of questions, although I suppose it was only fair.

"What do you think about the expulsion?" I changed the topic.

"Well... I don't really think anyone should be expelled, but what they did is horrible. I'd honestly be scared if they were still in school with us."

"Exactly. Not only that, but they're a drain on our class. It's better to see them gone. I'm cleaning house."

"But we lost 100 points?"

"They single-handedly lost us more points than that. We can

recover those points, but this is a preventative measure. Besides, everyone will work harder now that the threat of expulsion is real."

Karuizawa stopped for a moment. "You... you're insane."

"And yet you can't argue my point."

"Agghhh. You're so annoying. Right, tell me why we're going to your room?"

We walked through the fourth level corridor.

"We're not." I pulled out the key card I had stolen off Ike this morning. "We're going to Ike's room."

I unlocked the door and walked in, with Karuizawa tentatively following me in. It was disgusting. The room smelt of something I couldn't quite identify, and there were food scraps and tissues everywhere.

"Oh my god this is horrible. How do boys live like this?"

"Honestly, I can't believe it myself. But..." I leaned down and reached under the bed, sliding the object out of my sleeve as I did so, "here you go."

I handed Karuizawa the thing I had been hiding since I retrieved it from where Kikyou hid it on the island. Her missing underwear.

"Is this..."

She held in her hands the dirty and stained white underwear that had gone missing. I had purposefully spilt a few things on it, in order to make it seem that Ike had it. This would raise her favour in me for defending her, whilst also justifying my decision to expel him.

"Ike wouldn't stop boasting about it, but there was no easy way get proof. I assume you would rather he didn't leave school with them?"

Karuizawa was bright red, with a fire in her eyes.

"No, thank you, it's just... ahhh. I don't understand you at all."

I turned and made my way out of the room, leaving the key card inside. One last punishment for Ike. Having to get a new card wasn't an easy process, and he would have to do it during expulsion.

"I'm working for the class. People like you and Matsushita are useful, so you don't have to worry. People like Ike and Yamauchi, well... we can do without. Besides, Ike did this to you, and I said I'd protect you. This is my protection."

"That's cruel."

"That's life. The weak get discarded. The strong stand on top. That's the life you led by pretending to be a bully."

Karuizawa leaned against the wall in the hallway.

"I mean like yeah, but I didn't like it. It's not good."

I turned around and began to walk back to school.

"They might have finished arguing by now. Let's go."

"Ah, right!"

Karuizawa jumped up, hiding the dirty underwear in her pocket, and bounced to my side.

The next semester was beginning soon. Nagumo had it out for me, and Ichinose was preparing for battle. Ryuuen was an unknown. I had no idea what he wanted to do. And Sakayanagi wanted to play with us like dolls.

Bring it on.

Authors Notes:

Here we are, the end of Arc 5. This was an insanely long chapter. Originally, it was supposed to be three parts, but i just kept writing, and there was no easy way to stop so I just kept going. Sorry for the late update, it was supposed to come out last night, but I decided to just power through and finish it.

If the last third feels a bit rushed, that's probably because it was. I was finishing this at 3am while laughing too much at shitposts with the boys in discord, so it didn't have my full attention. I'm glad i finished it now though.

This is the longest chapter I've ever written, so I'd like some feedback on that. Do people prefer longer chapters? I'm not a fan of this length, at least not under this time pressure, but with longer gaps between chapters maybe. Idk, personally as a reader I would enjoy shorter but quicker updates, but that's just me.

Ike and Yamauchi are gone. Nagumo got humiliated. Sudou is a chad. Ayanokouji is rich as fuck. Amikura is Amikura. A lot of shit happened.

Moving onto Arc 6 now, which will be the sports festival. There will be a short hiatus for a couple of days now, just to read and reacquaint myself with the story, and fully plan it out, but I'm also moving into a new apartment, so it's a busy time for me still. It's also time for my annual Re:Zero re-watch and then re-read, so that's fucking hundreds of hours I'm going to lose over the next few weeks. God I love it, but the Arc 4 web novel especially is so fucking long.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 1 - Changes

It had been just under a month since the new semester began, and already I was beginning to feel changes in the school.

Most notably of them was Class C.

Ever since summer break, Ryuuen had been almost absent, with his grip on the class lessening more and more. His attention had been drifting, and it hadn't taken long for his class members to take the opportunity and begin to branch out.

More and more, I would see Class C students mingling with people from other classes. It wasn't as if they were all as cruel as Ryuuen, they simply hadn't been afforded the opportunity to make friends outside of their class. But now that Ryuuen wasn't enforcing his tyrannical rule so harshly, they had an opportunity to get to know our grade.

I'd walked through the school grounds, and the cafeteria, and seen groups of students who would never have mixed before. Sure, students had been sent out to gather information, to strategicly insert themselves into our classes significant friendship groups, but from what I could tell this was a genuine attempt to reach out, and our class had happily accepted.

There wasn't a lot of bad blood between us. Class D had done particularly well on the exams, and to the majority of students, Ryuuen's class didn't seem like a threat. Of course, they weren't aware of the goings on in the exams, and so the real danger was hidden, but outwardly, there was no real reason for Class D to dislike Class C.

Ryuuen though, instead of dealing with his collapsing class, was entirely distracted, and day by day more of his control was slipping.

He was seemingly entirely taken by Amikura.

It was an unexpected turn of events, but it seemed that the cold heart of the tyrant had been thawed by the insanity that was Amikura. The two of them had been seen on a number of dates ever since she flung herself at him at the pool, and for the life of me I couldn't figure out what was happening.

Every outcome of her actions that I had considered, none of them had reasonably ended in this result. Somehow, Amikura had managed to distract Ryuuen enough with her feminine charms to let

his class start to collapse.

Even if he broke it off now, and tried to pull the class together again, his authority was in the gutter. Any respect they had for him wouldn't be enough to follow Ryuuen again, not when there was always the chance for him to abandon them for a girl again.

Was it orchestrated? That seemed like the highest possibility, but if that was the case then it would have to be very well prepared. I didn't think that Class C was capable of such a scheme, and in my investigations, there hadn't been a hint of a plan.

Class C legitimately seemed leaderless now.

I was keeping a close eye on them, and so was Kikyou, probably more effectively, but so far there was nothing truly suspicious.

The other major change in the first years was the presence of a new Class A. The former Class B, led by Amikura, Ichinose and Kanzaki, had gained enough Class Points to rise above the former Class A, and now replaced them.

This turn of events had changed the attitude significantly of many students in my grade. While it wasn't uncommon for Class A to be dislodged from their position, the grade above us having done the exact same thing, in the majority of the previous years while the school had existed, Class A had held their rank until graduation.

It was to be expected, so for Class B to overtake them was an unusual situation, and it had forced many students to unnecessarily reassess themselves.

The new Class B students in particular were increasingly sullen and withdrawn, the bravado and inflated ego quite a few of them had possessed was gone. It wasn't all of them, it wasn't even half of them, but the most vocal members of the former superior class had been forced to reconsider their actions.

There were many who didn't care, or simply weren't concerned yet, but from an outward perspective, the average student was down in the dumps.

Of course, they had a new leader now, in the form of Sakayanagi. Many students weren't worried, attributing their loss to the leadership of Katsuragi, and believed that Sakayanagi would turn things around for them in their favour.

It was a fair assumption, and fresh leadership was always a boost for moral, but forever onwards, the students of Class B would remain cautious, as the brutal reminder that their success isn't certain was forced into their lives at the beginning of this semester.

The former Class B, and the new Class A, were much the opposite. In the true fashion for their class, they weren't boastful, and didn't try to look down on anyone else, being the kind-hearted people they were, but they also didn't shy away from conversation

about it.

It was an achievement to be proud of. They had reached the top, and now had the simple task of holding that position. It was something to share, to be happy with, not to hide to protect other people's feelings.

That would be true if it was their achievement.

The leadership of Class A was aware of this, but currently their position was a result of my magnanimousness, my belief that they would be more easily defeated from that position.

Class A hadn't earned their spot, not yet. They had been gifted it, and now I wanted to see if they were capable of holding it.

Sakayanagi was out for blood. Of course, she was somewhat forced to target them, in order to reclaim her position, but with Ryuuen otherwise occupied, he made for boring sport, leaving only Class A as a target for her.

I was curious on when she planned to attack.

It was much easier to do so during a special exam, since they were designed for competition, but it wasn't impossible, as Ryuuen proved last term. Sooner or later, they would face a reckoning, and against Sakayanagi's mind and capability for meticulous planning, along with the technically superior students in Class B, I wasn't going to be placing any bets on Class A's success.

I did owe Amikura a favour though, so that would certainly tip things in their direction. If she asked for it, that is.

Class A had received all the help they would be getting from me, outside of that favour. From now on, they would have to survive on their own. Things were becoming much more complex, and there was far too much attention on Class D now for me to be helping others.

Sakayanagi was on the move. While she wasn't actively targeting me yet, I couldn't see her turning down an opportunity if one appeared, and so I would have to constantly be on guard.

Class A would be trying to find a way to put me down for good as well, particularly Ichinose. Their leaders at least were aware that I was the biggest threat in the year, and I could expect danger from them in the future.

Ryuuen too, was most certainly plotting something. I didn't buy his act, not really, despite there being no evidence whatsoever to prove it was a lie. Call it intuition, but I could sense he hadn't let go of power just yet.

"Ayanokouji, the Student Council President wants to talk to you after school in his office."

"Right."

Chabashira interrupted the lesson just before the afternoon bell to

deliver the annoying news.

At the beginning of term, on the very first day of school, I had been given an order to come meet in order to resolve the issue. At first, I thought it was due to the car, or the water bottles, and the entire class had their own opinions on the matter.

In the end, it was an entirely unrelated event, something I had never heard of.

I had been accused by a second-year student of trying to fight them. As expected, the school had to launch an investigation, but since there was evidence to prove I hadn't been at where the accuser claimed I was, the case was thrown out.

I hadn't paid much attention during the mock-trial, but the one thing I did notice was Nagumo's terrifying grin.

That was just the beginning.

Almost every day, a new claim had been put forward, some new accusation against me of wrongdoing. Be it theft, bullying, harassment, getting in a fight, or even one time malicious littering, there was always an accusation against my name that I had to fight.

As of yet, none of them had been too serious. I had been making efforts to always stay in view of a security camera, so there was never evidence of wrongdoing, but Nagumo also hadn't been putting in much effort into fabricating stories and situation to trap me.

Sometimes he came along to the trial, and sometimes it was just Manabu interviewing me, but not once did he show any sign of worry or frustration. This was all a game to him, and he was letting the pressure build, slowly but surely making every situation that much more serious.

I had embarrassed him with the volleyball game, and this was the beginning of his revenge, his first attempt to target me.

And it was, in fact, working somewhat.

For the past few weeks, I had been forced to stay within the range of a camera, which limited what I could do. No underhanded deals could be made easily, and life was becoming very boring. While I hadn't been punished for anything yet, Nagumo was beginning to exert his pressure on me, and slowly but surely it was having an effect on my daily life.

At this point, no one was surprised or concerned about me getting into trouble. The announcement had become a very common one, and most of my classmates just ignored it and went on with ignoring the lesson in the last five minutes of class.

Once the bell rang, the lesson ended, and everyone began to pack up their stuff. Even though there was nothing unusual about me being called to the student council room, almost all my classmates

were ostensibly avoiding looking at me, not wanting to be caught the one time I did get into trouble.

Apparently, there was an expectation that one day I would be caught doing something. The water incident had done nothing to endear myself to my classmates.

There was one person who held no reservations though, and she was currently approaching my desk.

"You need to learn to stay out of trouble, Kiyotaka-kun," Kikyou admonished.

I stood up from my desk and looked down at the beaming girl before me. "You know exactly what's going on." Out of everyone in the class, I had only explained to Kikyou the true situation. Whether other people had figured it out, I had no idea.

"Hmm. I'll scout ahead! Make sure that no one is going to cause any more problems," she offered.

"No. You're better off not being caught out around me. It makes it much harder to retaliate if I have to constantly be worried about you."

I left the classroom and began the short walk to the student council room. What Kikyou was refering to was the numerous spies Nagumo had placed around the school, their only goal to notice me and if they can hinder my movements in some way. They either hadn't been told to hide, or were very bad at it, and so I could always see where they were.

"Aww, you do care about me～"

"Hardly. You're just too useful to be caught up in such a stupid situation." It was ridiculous, like a child throwing a tantrum. It was getting annoying, like a baby with a plastic knife stabbing your ankle. It didn't hurt much, but eventually you would want to dropkick it.

"Eh, well I have a meeting with a friend in 2-C. Have fun at your meeting!" We had reached the student council room, and with a cute wave, Kikyou bounced off to go and socialise.

I knocked on the door, and upon hearing Manabu call 'come in' I entered the room, shutting the door behind me.

"Please, take a sear," Manabu gestured at the chair in front of him.

I acquiesced his request and took a seat on the other side of the desk, noticing that strangely even Tachibana wasn't here. Today, it was just the two of us.

"What have I done now?" I sighed. Even Manabu looked fed up with the situation, clearly knowing I wouldn't be foolish enough to get caught doing anything.

"Shindo-san of Class 2-B has accused you of blackmailing him to

buy you food."

"And what am I blackmailing him with?"

"He wouldn't say."

I felt myself growing angry at this. The school's policy against bullying was rigid and ridiculous to the extreme. Of course, it was important to stop bullying, but the practice of guilty until proven innocent is a rather unfair one, and only serves to be used in a detrimental sense, like Nagumo was.

"Right. I'd like to file a harassment complaint against the entire second year," I said.

Manabu smirked slightly but didn't look up from the paperwork he was doing. Clearly, like me, he thought this was a complete waste of time.

"Impossible," he quickly denied.

"Of course. That would be much too protective a measure to give to one student. In that case, I'd like to propose a rule change."

That got Manabu to look up. Aim high, hit low, it was an easy strategy to make my real proposal much more realistic sounding.

"In what way? The school rules can't be easily changed, not even with points."

"I'm aware. But I think this should be amenable."

Another smile, and a glint in his eye, Manabu seemed to be thinking the same thing I was. "I was wondering how long you would let this go, before forcing the issue." He sighed. "To be honest, I've wanted to make some changes myself, but it's much more effective coming from someone in your situation."

"That's why I let this go on for so long."

The longer I was continuously hassled by the second-years, the more realistic my plight would seem to be, and the easier it would be to shut it down completely. A half-hearted attempt would only serve to provide loopholes for Nagumo to continue his war of attrition.

Finally finishing his paperwork, Manabu put it to the side, and pulled out a blank piece of paper and an ornate pen. "So, any specifics I should bring to the principal?"

"If someone is going to accuse me of something, they should require evidence first, not just an accusation. At least proof that I was near them at the time, or solid evidence that I did something. It's ridiculous to be called here constantly to deal with idiots without any proof, just accusations."

Manabu looked up at me. "You are aware that's already the rule."

"Yes, but there is a certain Vice-President targeting me, and approving all requests to interview me on certain situations. I wish to consolidate that power to the president."

It was a dangerous move, but necessary for now. If I could take away some of Nagumo's power, he would be limited in the ways he could attack me, and Manabu could start shoring up his defences against the wily Vice-President.

The counterpoint though, was that Nagumo was almost certain to take power at the end of this semester, and then would have even more control. It was a dangerous game, as I was setting up an even stronger enemy in the future.

This would guarantee him to stop his plans for now, at least as a courtesy for my actions that did inadvertently help him.

I got a searching look in response, but when I didn't take back my request, manabu wrote it down on the paper.

"I'll be sure to deliver this idea to the Principal. I hope you know what you're doing, Ayanokouji," the president warned me.

"Don't worry. Everything is under control."

Manabu leaned back in his chair, contemplative. "I suppose I should ask about the blackmail again."

"Oh, right. Well, I never actually received anything from Shindou, nor have I met him before. So, there's nothing to convict me of."

"That's what I thought." Sighing, Manabu crumpled up a piece of paper, most likely the incident report, and tossed it in the bin. I would have thought that every document would be kept recorded, but it seemed like there was a new level for wasteful false accusations. "Are you going to be able to handle Nagumo? I know I asked for your help, but I wouldn't want to force you into an unfair confrontation."

I shrugged. "It's too late for that. He's targeting me whether you want me to or not. Besides, I'm looking forward to a real challenge." I wasn't sure if Nagumo could present that, but he was the best the school had to offer. Even Manabu I had already beaten, even if he didn't know it yet.

"Please try not to destroy the school in the process. Four people have already left your grade, all of them connected to you. I don't trust you Ayanokouji, remember that. I'm asking for your help to protect the school and its students, something that Nagumo is threatening."

I stood up, sensing the meeting to be coming to its conclusion. "You didn't ask for my help Manabu."

"No?" He seemed genuinely curious as to what I meant. A shame. I thought someone of his calibre would figure it out.

"We made a deal. You just weren't aware of my side of the bargain. And I will collect on that debt. Even the devil comes for your soul in the end."

"Is that what you want then, Ayanokouji? My soul, to save this

school from Nagumo?"

I walked over to the door, stopping before I left. "Not at all. I want this school."

Manabu's eyes sharpened, in a very threatening manner. "Sometimes I wonder if you truly were worth asking for help."

"Better the devil you know. It's too late now, Manabu. The situation is entirely beyond your control." I opened the door, and tried to leave, but caught one last sentence as I stepped out.

"Things are going to change tomorrow, Ayanokouji. I recommend caution."

I had nothing to say to that piece of advice, and so after shutting the door behind me I moved to head back to the dorms.

That was my plan, before I ran into the person waiting outside for me.

"What are you doing here, Kikyou?"

She had been leaning against the wall outside the student council room, clearly trying to listen in.

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself! Ehe, but that was a really serious conversation you just had." She scratched her head in embarrassment.

"I'm going to tell Manabu to invest in soundproofing." I tried to walk off and Kikyou quickly followed once again, matching up to my side. I slowed my stride slightly, so she didn't have to hurry to match my longer legs.

"But then how will I spy on your meetings?"

Hmm, that's a good point. "I'll hide a recording device in there. Then you can listen to everything that happens."

A devious smile crossed Kikyou's face. "Oh, that would be incredible! I could hear every secret the student council has! Ah, but it would take forever to listen to everything, so I don't know if it's worth it."

"I'll do it anyway. I doubt they can track back a cloud server routed through three private servers back to me." If this school was capable of tracking back an internet recording device back to me, I would accept my defeat on the spot.

"It's your funeral," Kikyou brushed off my plan.

"I thought you were meeting with a friend this afternoon." My meeting with Manabu hadn't lasted that long, so it was a surprise to see her waiting outside for me.

"Ah, that's right! It was really quick, but I got the information I wanted." Kikyou took off on a short run and got in front of me, leaning forward with her hands behind her back in an incredibly cute pose. "Don't you want to know what your cute best friend found out for you?"

"...sure."

"Aha, you could try being more enthusiastic about it." Kikyou wasn't even phased at my lack of a reaction, at least not outwardly. If there weren't people around, I suspect I would have gotten a punch on the arm.

"What did you find out?" I was curious as to what secret she had uncovered. I hadn't asked for Kikyou to investigate anything, but as usual her independence was what made her so valuable. She could think for herself and make herself useful without me having to direct her. So anything she had gone out of her way to learn about was sure to be important.

"Hmm, well I first heard a mention of something strange a week into this term. I couldn't find anything out from most of my second year friends though. Lots of them are in Class 2-A or 2-B, and there's not much I can do to get secrets from them." She was understandably displeased by this development. No matter how kind or cute she acted, she couldn't get her seniors to as easily divulge important stuff. "But today I finally got a meeting with someone from 2-C, and I paid them a bunch of points as well, you're welcome by the way, and they told me what was happening."

"And?"

Kikyou clasped her hands together on her chest, the picture of admiration. "You've got a bounty on your head! That's so cool!"

"Ah, I see."

So that was Nagumo's plan. It seemed strange that he could continuously get so many students from multiple classes to accuse me for no reason, but a bounty incentive made much more sense. If there was a reward for whoever could get me suspended or expelled, everything was much clearer. That explained his limited efforts: he wasn't the one doing anything at all. The entire second grade was doing his work for him.

There's also no easy way to counter a bounty. The only effective method would be to place a higher one on Nagumo, but it would take an exorbitant number of points to convince anyone in the second year it was worth the risk to go after him. And he could always raise mine higher than his. I simply didn't have the funds to do so.

"Well, it's somewhat dealt with now, but I'll have to be wary for such tactics in the future. Thank you, Kikyou." Small praise went a long way.

"Ehe, of course I'll help you out! You're my best friend, after all."

We continued on, leaving the school and returning to the dorms. Kikyou had plans to meet with some friends later, and I had to set up an encrypted untraceable cloud server to record the student

council room. It was an interesting challenge, something I hadn't done for a long time.

But most of my attention was stuck on the last words that Manabu had shared with me. It seemed life was going to become interesting again.

Authors Notes:

Here we go, I'm back and writing! Wooooo!

Honestly, it's been a rough week and a half. Moving out of home, having to find a new job, and all the other worries that come from throwing yourself out into the world, but when I sat down yesterday to write again, I really felt in the zone.

Been smashing through a bunch of light novels recently, so I have no idea if my writing style has changed, I couldn't see any difference, but that would explain any differences. Back in the writing zone, so expect a chapter every two days again, at least for the rest of this arc.

General setup for this chapter. There's a bunch of changes here, and we have well and truly diverged from the light novel at this point, so i wanted to highlight some of the major ones.

Nagumo is a difficult character, because we haven't seen too much of him really, and all we know is that he has full control over his year by the start of the third year. I did my best for a beginning attack from him here. Honestly, he does remind me a lot of Kushida or Ichinose early on, with his control of everyone, where people are his best weapon, although he's also extremely talented and smart.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 2 - The Sports Festival Announcement

The next day, our afternoon class became a two-hour homeroom session. When Chabashira walked in with a pile of papers in her hand, I knew this was what Manabu had warned me about.

"Starting today, classes begin again. However, from September to the beginning of October, we will be holding more physical education classes to prepare for the school sports festival. We'll distribute new weekly schedules, so please review them carefully. In addition to the new schedules, we'll also distribute materials related to the festival. Students seated at the front, please pass handouts to those behind you, and so on."

The moment Chabashira uttered the words "sports festival," the class erupted in an uproar. Some students were undoubtedly excited by the prospect, but just as many loathed the idea of anything focused on physical exertion.

"The details on the printed handouts can be found on the school homepage as well. Please refer to them if necessary."

"Sensei, is this another one of those special exams?" Hirata cautiously asked.

Most students would probably expect a response of 'naturally', but it was clear that this was different just from the title.

"You're free to interpret this however you wish. In any case, this event will massively impact each and every class."

As expected, it wasn't an ordinary special exam, at least not to the school. It would have an impact, but not in the usual sense, like on the island or cruise ship.

There was a mixed response from the class, as students either became more or less excited at that new information. For some, being forced to do physical exertion in order to help the class was a horrible thought. Sotomura in particular was looking rather gloomy. Other sporty students though, particularly Sudou, were looking even more fired up. This was the chance for him and other less academically inclined students to support the class in their own way.

I looked over the paper, and my eyes were instantly dragged to the testing method. It was unusual, to say the least, for so much

detail to be involved with a sports festival, but I was already considering possibilities to give my less-than-mediocre class an advantage.

"Some people have noticed this already, but for this year's festival, we're going to divide all the students across all grade levels into two groups and have them compete against each other. You in Class D are assigned to the Red Team. Class A is also assigned to the Red Team, so they will compete alongside you," explained Chabashira.

Classes B and C were assigned to the White Team. It would be Red versus White.

While this may seem like a balanced field, in the current school environment this was a large advantage towards the red team. In the first years, most classes were actually somewhat evenly matched, to the point where Class A would probably come last in terms of physical abilities. Class C was definitely the best, and Class A was no pushover, but I was confident in my ability to carry the class, along with powerhouses like Sudou and, if convinced, Kouenji.

It was the second and third years that gave a larger advantage.

In the third years, there was still competition, but Class A was far and beyond the best class. Unfortunately for the White Team, Class 3-D wasn't a pushover. Sure, they were out of the running for ever reaching Class A at this point, but their athletic ability was strangely high, managing to match Class 3-B and 3-C rather closely. In terms of an average strength, the Red Team came out on top in the third year.

Similarly, in the second year Nagumo was the leading powerhouse. It wouldn't take much for him to convince Class B and C to hold back slightly, or at least target key weaknesses and bribe them, giving Red Team another lead.

What this meant, was that unless there was a complete and utter collapse in the first years, unless Class 1-A and 1-D came dead last, the results would be competitive, but heavily weighted in the Red Teams favour.

It was no sure thing, but what it meant was that I had a fairly long leash to do whatever I wanted this Sports Festival.

While I had been thinking, Chabashira continued on with the explanation.

"First, let's review the sports festival's potential outcomes. I don't want to have to explain them to you repeatedly, so please listen carefully," said Chabashira.

She went over the text on the printout, tapping the paper forcefully to indicate where to look. Still listening, I lowered my

eyes to the handout.

Sports Festival Rules and Team Division

The sports festival divides all students, across all grade levels, into two teams: Red and White. The breakdown goes as follows: Classes A and D are on the Red Team, Classes B and C are on the White Team.

Point Allocation for All Competitors (Individual Competitions)

Points will be allocated as follows: first place will be awarded fifteen points, second place will be awarded twelve points, third place will be awarded ten points, and fourth place will be awarded eight points.

One point will be deducted for coming in fifth place, and one additional point will be subtracted for each place below that. (During a team competition, the winning team will be awarded 500 points.)

Point Allocation for Recommended Competitors

Points will be allocated as follows: first place will be awarded fifty points, second place will be awarded thirty points, third place will be awarded fifteen points, and fourth place will be awarded ten points.

Two points will be deducted for coming in fifth place, and two additional points will be subtracted for each place below that. (The final competition, the relay race, will offer three times the point values.)

Red Team vs. White Team Outcome

After reviewing the combined overall scores for each class, 100 class points will be deducted from the first-, second-, and third-year batches of the two classes on the losing team.

The Effect of Ranking by Grade Level

Fifty class points will be awarded to the class that scores highest in each of the three grade levels. Classes that achieve second place in their grade level will not see any changes to their class point totals. Classes that achieve third place in their grade level will have fifty class points deducted, and classes that achieve fourth place will have 100 class points deducted.

"Sensei, are you saying that the best outcome is only 50 points? This is a rather cruel situation."

Hirata actually argued back with Chabashira over the absurd point distribution. I too, was somewhat surprised by this. It was a harsh situation, where even by winning in your year, you could still suffer a loss. The most realistic outcome would be to hope for no change at all.

Chabashira's response to that question was cruel and brief. "Don't

lose then. The reward for winning is not losing any points," she shrugged.

Cries of agony sprang up all over the classroom. It was complete pandemonium. Of course, that was hardly surprising. Up until then, whenever there was an enormous risk, there had been an enormous reward to spur us on. However, that hardly seemed the case in this sports festival.

Individual Competition Rewards (may be applied to the next midterm exam)

Students who achieve first place in an individual competition will be awarded either 5000 private points, or the score equivalent of three points on a written test.

(In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.)

Students who achieve second place in an individual competition will be awarded either 3000 private points, or the score equivalent of two points on a written test. (In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.)

Students who achieve third place in an individual competition will be awarded either 1000 private points, or the score equivalent of one point on a written test. (In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.)

Students who score lowest in an individual competition will have 1000 private points deducted from their total. (In the event that a student has less than 1000 points, they will instead receive a one-point penalty on a written exam.)

Regarding Rule Violations/Foul Play

Read and comply with every competition's rules. Those who violate the rules will be disqualified. Anyone engaging in foul play may be forced to withdraw from the festival. In such cases, the school may render all previously awarded points invalid.

MVP Reward

The student who receives the highest total score across all competitions will be awarded 100,000 private points.

MVP Rewards for Each Individual Grade Level

The three students from each grade level who receive their grade's highest total score across all competitions will be awarded 10,000 private points.

That last rule settled it. I would be getting MVP across the school. 100,000 points was an easy excuse for trying my best. Besides, I couldn't allow someone incompetent like Sudou, or deadly like Nagumo, to get such an advantage.

The exam points would create a decisive tension in my class, that was something I could already tell. Many students were struggling as it was with exams, and would only see the benefits of such an opportunity, winning a race and getting the help, but forget that to do so they would have to win a race, something they were entirely incapable of doing. Even if that was pointed out, the greed would still cause a split in the class.

Well, that was the role of Hirata or Horikita to try and fix and fight over. I would just assure that the argument didn't affect the results. With the handicap from being on the Red Team, I would have to make sure we won. This was a crucial junction wherein which the two most dangerous classes could be dragged down.

Ryuuen too, as I had no belief that he would sit this out distracted by Amikura, would be constricted due to the foul play rules. He would of course try something, Sakayanagi as well very likely, but they would still have to ensure they didn't get caught.

The rest of the class was in conversation with Chabashira, about the deductions and penalties of coming last. Many of them would suffer that, and in turn lose a point on their next exam. Similarly, the ten most useless students in the sports festival would lose 10 points on their next exam.

It made me thankful I had cleaned house already, and disposed of the three potentially most damaging students here.

Sakura, Ike and Yamauchi were neither athletic, not academic, and if they were still around this exam would be deadly to both them and by extension this class. It was much better that they were gone.

Aside from the punishments, there were two types of events to consider. All participants and Reccomended participants. Like the name, All participants would require everyone from our class to participate, but Reccomended only required select nominated students. It was the individual events that would net us the most points, and those were the ones I would focus on with the strength of people like Sudou.

Most of the events in All participants were group events though, and would allow me to win through brute strength. Capture the flag was easy enough, tug-of-war would be a sure win, and as long as I could dodge, we would never *lose* the cavalry event. Winning it was different.

The Reccomended events were more complex, but with the big rewards from the 1200m relay, as long as Sudou, Kouenji, Onodenera and I ran seriously, I was confident we would be the fastest class.

Chabashira continued on answering pointless questions which

could be understood by reading the pamphlet and thinking for a few seconds, but most of the class seemed unable to do so.

There were only two other considerations to worry about right now: Class A, and the participation table.

The latter would cause the most problems. Apparently, every decision had to be done as a class consensus, an agreement which would never be reached, at least not for a while.

The problem was, it wouldn't be the perfect setup, having to cater to the selfish desires of my classmates. If we were going to win, I could produce the optimal table, but there wouldn't be many people to support it.

Eh, Chabashira can just lie for me again.

Class A wasn't even worth thinking about. We were teammates only in name, and at the end of the day, there wasn't a strategy that we could trust them with, nor they us. The fact of the matter was, we would cooperate for the forced events, and be enemies in every other facet. I couldn't be bothered even planning with them.

Chabashira wrapped up the session by answering Horikita that it would cost 100,000 points for a substitute. An expensive fee for us, but I could pay that a multitude of times at this point, if it came down to it.

Once there were no more questions, we were directed towards the gymnasium, where every other student would be. This was a chance for the Red and White Teams to come together, as well as year level classes to plan their cooperation.

It was a pointless endeavour. We would get almost nothing out of it.

Sighing, I pulled out my phone and began to compose an email. It was important to get this done now, but it seemed my neighbour Horikita had better ideas.

"I would like your opinion on all this, Ayanokouji-kun. Do you have a plan?"

"Win," I responded succinctly.

"Well, thank you for your genius intellect," she replied sarcastically. "Anything more concrete to share, or are you going to hang us out to dry again?"

I looked up and scanned the room. "Maybe you should consider that it's a perfectly normal sports festival. Then my answer would make a lot of sense."

"This isn't a normal school."

"True. In that case, you should start making your evil plans with your fanbase before Hirata steals them all." I gestured towards where the man in question was talking to some classmates.

Horikita and Hirata were already on thin ice with each other as it

was. With their differences in ideology, this exam would become a tipping point, where Hirata worked for the individuals, and Horikita advocated for the greater good. They would be forced to collide, or give up on their ideals. Currently, Hirata was in the lead for securing much-needed support.

"Fine. Do whatever you want. I'll win this exam in my own way."

"You do that, Ice Queen."

I looked back down at my phone, and continued with my work, ignoring the huffing girl leaving the seat beside me. I had no need to observe and take the pulse of the class right now.

Both Kikyou and Karuizawa were doing that for me, going around and talking to their friends. I could expect a detailed report from the former, and maybe a general vibe from the other. One had significantly more value in my mind.

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A crowd of over four hundred people, including instructors and students, gathered together in the gymnasium during our second homeroom period.

It was a mess of slowly forming groups and classes, as the hundreds of students slowly congregated around their identified leaders.

I did what I did best and stayed to the side, leaning against a wall and watched the mess unfold before me. It wasn't long before I was joined by a friend.

"Ayanokouji-kun, fancy meeting you here."

"I watched you walk around for five minutes trying to find me, Sayakanagi."

"Fufufu there's no point lying to you, is there," the woman in question giggled to herself.

Sakayanagi Arisu, the nominal leader of Class B, had wandered over to my side in order to avoid the large crowd in the center of the gymnasium. It was unexpected, but I could at least understand why she would. She was the leader, so it was expected for her to join her class, but there was no point in someone of her stature trying to call people over. A smarter choice was to wait until they had already grouped up and then make an entrance.

"What a pointless waste of time," Sakayanagi remarked.

"You think so too, huh?"

For the class leaders, there wasn't much to discuss. For inter-year teams, there also wasn't much to say, beyond any secret tips or information they felt like sharing. Truly, we had all been gathered here just for the students in each class to get along. From a leader's perspective, there was no point.

"I wonder what the ducks are plotting today."

"Eh? Ducks?" Try as I might I couldn't follow Sakayanagi's metaphor.

"Class A. Little ducklings swimming in a big pond. You led them with a trail of bread into the deepest water, and while they bob around congratulating themselves on getting such a reward, they don't notice the danger from below. But now, there's no more bread to follow."

In other words, every class would be gunning for their spot, and without my help, Class A would flounder and die. As for their plotting, well, Sakayanagi saw that as inconsequential, and not enough to save them.

"That's a bit of a stretch, don't you think?"

"Fufufu I suppose we will see if the ducks can out-plot a very angry cripple." There was a fire in her eyes, which didn't at all match her laughter.

Soon enough, the classes had congregated, with White Team at one end and Red Team at the other.

"I'll be seeing you, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm expecting an impressive show at the festival."

"It's a shame that we're enemies. Maybe I shouldn't have given Class A a helping hand." I considered a world where Sakayanagi and I could team up. It was certainly an interesting situation to be in.

"Fufufu, no this is much more fun. I'm sure 'Ryuuen-chan' and I will come up with something interesting," she promised.

"I'd expect nothing less."

I walked over to the Red Team, as Sakayanagi hobbled over to the White, and took a seat behind everyone else, near my class. As the lowest standing in the school, we had been relegated to the back.

"I'm Fujimaki, from the third-year Class A. It's been decided that I will assume command of Red Team."

Apparently, Manabu wasn't going to take charge. I would've thought that he'd take the lead, being student council president. This just made me wonder when he would make a move. Now that I was in conflict with Nagumo, and Manabu clearly had his own agenda, I would need to pay closer attention to him.

"I'd like to give the first-year students one piece of advice. The sports festival is extremely important. Your experiences here will most certainly be applicable to real life. In fact, many of your future exams may look like games at first glance. However, each and every one of them is a crucial battle in which you stake your survival at this school," said Fujimaki.

His words were somewhat vague, and rather unhelpful.

"You may not feel motivated right now, but we're going to try and

win this thing. I want you to hold on to that feeling," Fujimaki continued. He looked around the assembled Red Team members once again before speaking. "The only competition which all classes from all grade levels will participate in together is the final event—the 1200-meter relay race. "Aside from that, all the other events are divided up by grade level. So, please, feel free to gather and discuss your strategies, starting now."

As expected, Fujimaki's speech was rather pointless, filled with fluff that sounded impressive. What it came down to was information we already knew but spoken in a way that made it sound useful.

And yet, everyone took it as an opportunity to talk strategy. I sighed, resolved to sitting through this tedious situation.

Class D began to flounder, before slowly converging into two smaller groups, one surrounding Hirata, and one surrounding Horikita, the former not much larger. Even so, I was impressed by how large of a support base Horikita had grown, with a lot more people supporting her than I had expected. Even Karuizawa was standing by her, although that might have something to do with her break-up with Hirata.

The two groups began to talk amongst themselves, and Hirata and Horikita eventually made contact and exchange ideas. As expected, the two of them were thinking of vastly different strategies, and would be incapable as cooperative leaders.

Luckily, to spare my ears from their childish bickering, the triumvirate of Class A approached us, with an organised class following closely behind them.

"Ah, if it isn't our lovely teammates, Class D!" It was Amikura who initiated the conversation.

"Good afternoon, Amikura-san, Ichinose-san, Kanzaki-kun."

"Yes, good afternoon."

Horikita and Hirata were both courteous in their greetings.

"Hmm, but where's your leader? I don't see them anywhere." Amikura was putting on a big show of looking around for me. I was doing my best to disappear into the background of the two groups.

"I'm the leader."

An instant response, from both Horikita and Hirata, with them exchanging glares as a result.

"No no that won't do. We all need to cooperate together, don't we?" Ichinose was doing her best to mediate the situation, before it devolved too far.

"Besides, I'd like for Ayanokouji to be here. It would be a shame for the best student of Class D to be missing from our conversation," Kanzaki added.

"We don't need a self-centered man like that here. He would refuse to cooperate anyway."

"Ayanokouji isn't someone I consider a friend or a co-leader. His ideals are far too radical for this class." Hirata was still upset about the incident with Ike and Yamauchi.

It hurt though, that the only thing the two agreed on was their disregard of me.

"Ah, but I want to speak to Ayanokouji-kun! If we work with him, there's no chance of losing! None!"

Amikura was beginning to sound like a petulant child who couldn't have her favourite toy, and even Ichinose had to step in to calm her down.

"Mako-chan, if Ayanokouji-kun wanted to be here, he would be. Kouenji-kun left ages ago, so we can just work without Ayanokouji-kun."

I looked around, only to notice that Ichinose was right, and Kouenji hadn't stuck around. If memory served me correctly, I couldn't even remember seeing him after he stopped near the entrance as we arrived. Ah, that made more sense now.

"Oh? Why are you trying to avoid him, Honami-chan? Don't tell me... you did something lewd?!"

"N-not at all! Why would you even say that!" Ichinose had gone very red at the suggestion. "I'm just saying we don't need to plan with him. Ayanokouji-kun does things his own way, and we don't need to fit his strategy- he will fit his to ours."

Unsurprisingly, Ichinose, as someone who I had worked closely with in previous exams, had a good grasp on how I worked. I would see an advantage and take it, no matter the consequences, and if they came up with a half-decent plan, I could work with it.

Sensing that the majority of the group didn't want me around, even Kanzaki, Amikura finally gave in and began the conversation without me. Again, there wasn't much to plan, but what they could the five of them began to hash out.

Bored of their conversation after not to long, and losing my cover as many of my classmates began to sit down to rest their legs, I moved away from my class and took up a new position against the wall, next to the sleeping Kiryuuin.

She hadn't lasted long at all. I was expecting a good showing from her at the sports festival, if only to knock Nagumo down a peg, but this situation was incredibly boring to the cat beside me.

I took this chance to observe how the other first year classes were operating. Class B and C were supposed to be cooperating, but it wasn't going all too well.

Ryuuen had vanished, leaving behind his class. I wasn't sure what

he was planning, but as of now there was no leadership for Class C.

Sakayanagi, to her credit, had managed to rally a significant number, and was currently setting down the group strategy for both of their classes. For someone who had just been abandoned by her co-leader, she seemed remarkably well composed, even more than I would expect.

Clearly, she had arranged something with Ryuuen earlier. There was a piece of evidence now, actual evidence as opposed to my hunch, that his behaviour was an act.

I was more curious as to whether Amikura realised this. Did either of them truly know who was the cat and who was the mouse?

Authors Notes:

Not much to say about this. A bit of setup happening, but honestly, the lead up to the festival will be kinda dull. It's a lot of discussions and watching stuff while plans are set up, but as of my current plan, it will get much more fun in chapter 5.

I left the rules in here both to pad the chapter, and as a reminder. They're pretty complex for a sports festival, and a lot of the arguments are based on understanding the risks and rewards of the festival, so even if you just skimmed through, the refresher should hopefully help.

There will be a .5 chapter coming out tomorrow, and then the usual schedule continuing from that. It's been a long time (Arc 1) since i did a .5 chapter, but this one just didn't fit anywhere and I needed to write it.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 2.5 - Chabashira is Useful

I left the gymnasium and headed back towards the school. Since the day had ended now, almost everyone else was returning to their dorms, or whatever else they had planned for the rest of the afternoon.

I, however, had business to conduct.

As I passed through the main gate, I ran into Chabashira, who had been waiting for me.

"I'm surprised to see you back here, Ayanokouji. Didn't you know that class was finished for the day?"

I ignored her terrible humour and tried to move the conversation quickly. "I assume you received my email?"

The email I had been working on in class was for Chabashira, after all. It would be strange if she hadn't read it in the free time while we students were at the gymnasium.

"Of course. And I'm sure that you're aware it's an impossible request."

Her denial was surprising, but not completely unexpected. After all, I was asking her to break a rule for the exam, which was grounds for her to lose her job if caught.

"I don't see the problem. I created a participation table that will give us the best chance of winning. Well, almost. I'm also telling you that not a single person has disagreed with this plan, in fact of everyone I've shown it to there has been a complete consensus."

It wasn't a lie. I'd shown it to Kikyou so far, and she'd replied with a thumbs up. A second opinion from someone who knew the class didn't hurt, after all.

"And the entire class agreed to it?" There was a hesitancy in Chabashira's voice, but this was her out. She had been led to believe we all agreed to the plan, nothing more. There was no evidence to the contrary.

"Of course. Make sure that my plan is the one used, if you want to have any chance of success in this event."

There was a thinly veiled threat there. If my plan wasn't used, our entire class could collapse.

Chabashira pursed her lips, contemplating the situation. But in the end, I knew she would agree.

"And what should I do when the entire class agrees to a plan, and asks me to use that one?"

I shrugged. "Do it. Just replace it with mine at the last possible moment. I don't care how many times it's changed, or how many secret plans are submitted, as long as mine is the final result."

In actuality, I suspected it was down to the homeroom teacher of each class to determine what the rules meant. Secretly submitting a plan was a valid strategy, and I was sure that most classes would do it. Unless the homeroom teacher was the one to complain, I didn't think the school would intervene. Chabashira's reluctant acceptance of my plan only lent strength to that theory.

"I'd also prefer it if you didn't tell anyone who's plan it was," I added. "Better to keep people guessing as to who the traitor was."

If this was last semester, the attention would instantly have fallen on me. But there was an artificial war brewing between Horikita and Hirata, neither of which wanted to talk it out, and so each would suspect the other.

"Traitor?" Chabashira seemed surprised at that word.

"Never mind," I brushed her concern off. Now wasn't the time for wordplay. "So?"

Another moment of thought, that I didn't dare interrupt.

"Fine. I'll submit your names." She sighed deeply. "I suppose I'm already too far into your web of schemes to get out scot free now."

Chabashira had already violated several rules to help me out. Backing down now would only lead to trouble for her. Her only choice was to double down on me in order to reach Class A. Truly, she had no more cards to play to secure her position in the school. Everything she had was bet on me. Even those who have nothing, can give their lives. If it came to it, I would claim hers for my victory.

"Good. Make sure to inform me of anyone who secretly tries to submit a participation table. Allow it and make no mention of mine. If anyone asks about it, it doesn't exist. And inform me of anyone who tries to see any of them."

They were a lot of restrictions, but it was important for me to be on top of the situation at all times. Any betrayals I should already know about ahead of time.

"And what if someone asks me to do the same?" For the sake of argument, Chabashira brought up a random point.

"Prioritise mine, obviously. And if anyone has already done this, which I doubt, I want you to void all pre-existing deals. My participation table is the priority for your goal, after all." I didn't think there was a single person in the class that prepared, but I couldn't be certain. It was best to cover all my bases.

Chabashira smirked at my words. "Be glad you said that last part. As a matter of fact, a participation table was submitted not half an hour ago. Almost identical to yours, in fact. I'm sure you can guess who it was then?"

"Kouenji."

So that was where he had snuck off to. I was surprised he had made an effort, but if they truly were similar, I could understand the reason.

"So, you'll still prioritise mine then?" I inquired.

"Yes, Kouenji even mentioned I should do so if you asked me to, and if one detail was the same. It's a moot point now though."

He really had thought of everything, in his desire for personal satisfaction. To be expected from someone who thought of themselves as a perfect existence.

"I guess that's sorted then. Make sure you do the right thing, Chabashira."

I turned and walked away from her and the school, intent on having an afternoon nap. I left so quickly I almost missed the tired remark she made once I rounded the corner.

"These students really are extraordinary. And they're going to be the death of me."

Authors Notes:

Short .5 chapter just for filler info. Not much to say about it.

Couple of things to clarify from last chapter. The winning team does not get 100 class points. I too was under this misconception, and it really fucked up my points calculations when i found out it was wrong. Clearly at some point someone wrote it in a fic, and it's become the assumed thing, but according to canon the only change is -100 for the losing team.

Also, current class rankings are:

Class A (Amikura), Class B (Sakayanagi), Class C (Ryuuen), Class D (Ayanokouji)

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 3 - Debate

The sports festival was in a month's time, and for the next few weeks, we would be given the two hourly homeroom session to do with as we pleased.

And so, that was how Horikita and Hirata successfully split the class in as little as half an hour.

Backtracking a bit to the start of the session, it was decided that we would begin planning our strategy now. No progress had been made since the announcement, since most people had been just considering ideas, planning how to practice, but mostly we just hadn't gotten together since.

Most students, myself included, left the school right at the end of the day. Even if they were asked to stay for planning, it was unreasonable to expect the entire class to show up, and since we needed a consensus on all decisions, nothing could be done until now.

And so, Hirata stood up and took the spot at the front of the class with a serious expression on his face.

"I think we're all aware of just how important the upcoming festival is. I want everyone to be on the same page, so that we can get through it together as a class. There's a lot of danger, but with the right preparation we shouldn't have anything to worry about." The smile he had worn in the first semester was nowhere to be seen. Hirata was taking this as seriously as he could, and was willing to force the class in the direction he wanted.

"The first thing we need to decide is the order of participation," Hirata continued. "I've taken the liberty of drawing up a draft participation table, so we have a base to start with. This gives us a strategy to work with, with only minor modifications." Saying this, he began to hand out copies of the participation table, one for everyone in the class. Perhaps he hoped that by pressuring everyone with an existing option, most people would cave and agree with his plans.

Looking it over, it was very clear what his idea was. Hirata had done his best to spread everyone out, with the fastest runners in every different event. Everyone had been given a fair chance in this plan, and if we followed it, yes, we would probably avoid the exam

point demerits for most students. This was a conservative plan, not at all intended for winning, but for safety and security. Hirata wasn't trying to win. If we followed this, Class D would probably come third or fourth in the end, but almost everyone would be safe. We would never win any All Participant events, but we would never come dead last either.

As for the Reccomended Participants, Hirata had at least made an attempt for victory. His plan was similar to mine, putting our best participants up for those events, but still in a conservative way. He clearly didn't want to force anyone to work too hard, but that was a further detriment to his proposal. Even Sudou was only listed in half of the events.

As expected, my neighbour found the entire idea ridiculous.

"Garbage."

That was the response that filled the quiet room, dragging everyone's attention from reading the table and onto Horikita, who crumpled up the paper and dropped it on the floor.

"Hey, Hirata-kun worked hard on that!"

One of the girls in the class cried out defending their king, but Horikita took no notice of them. Instead, she gracefully pulled herself up from her desk, and slowly walked to the front of the room, before stopping face-to-face with Hirata.

"Is there a problem with my suggestion, Horikita?" It was a simple question, but there was an underlying dangerous tone in his voice.

"I didn't pick you for a coward, Hirata-kun. And yet, you've handed out a plan that embodies the true meaning of the word."

A large cry spouted at that, as Hirata's fan club jumped to defend him, but I, along with the two at the front, ignored them. This was much too interesting to miss.

"This entire plan... it's worthless. You're so afraid of any loss, that you won't take a risk. You aren't even trying to win. You can't come up with a winning participation table without comparing the athletic abilities of our classmates either."

It was aggressive, but Horikita accurately summed up my thoughts on the situation.

"Of course, I'm trying to win." Hirata smiled coldly at Horikita, and instantly I could tell how this was going to go.

"But—"

"I'm not willing to sacrifice my classmates to do so, Horikita-san. Yes, I want to win, but not at the expense of the rest of the class."

"You say that as if it's a loss if we follow a different strategy."

Neither of them were backing down, the rest of the class quiet in order to let them argue. No one wanted to interrupt, especially when there was already a divide in opinion.

"What do you suggest we do then, Horikita-san?" Hirata tried a different approach, allowing Horikita to speak her mind.

"That's rather simple. We organise the participation based on ability. That way, we can ensure that our class gains the most amount of points possible. The goal of this sports festival is to avoid losing class points, and this is the best way to do so."

It was a logical argument, and I could see a number of my classmates agreeing with it. And yet...

"It's certainly one way to approach the situation. But you're ignoring all of the students who might come last, and end up losing exam marks. You're disregarding the losses that come from your strategy."

In response to Hirata's claim, Horikita didn't answer him. Instead, she turned to the class, and singled out a student.

"Yukimura-kun. In terms of your athletic ability, how would you rate yourself? Be honest."

All the attention turned onto Yukimura. It was a smart choice by Horikita to call on him, as one of her closest supporters. They both had a similar logical mindset, willing to make tough choices for the best overall result based on reasoning and not emotions.

"Honestly? I'm probably one of the lowest."

"And would you be willing to participate in an ability-dictated system, even though it puts you at a disadvantage? Keep in mind that you might lose points in the midterms."

It was a masterful choice to word it that way, and to use Yukimura as an example. It was well-known that he wasn't fit, and under Horikita's plan, he would certainly be at a heavy disadvantage. And yet, due to his logical mindset, he agreed with the plan.

"Of course. In any case, even if I was given the opportunity, I wouldn't be able to win anyway, as is the case for most of us here. If I have to make a sacrifice in order to help the class win, then I'm happy to do so."

"Excellently put, Yukimura-kun." Turning back to Hirata, Horikita continued to make her point. "Hirata-kun, everyone has to make sacrifices for the class at one point or another. You can't protect everyone, and still climb to Class A."

"No. It seems I can't."

Horikita took a step back at those words, seeming to not have expected them. To her, who had no purpose at this school other than to reach Class A and make her brother recognise her, it was an unthinkable stance.

"What?"

"I don't care if we don't get to Class A, if it means protecting

everyone here."

Such a simple statement, yet it rocked the class. I looked around, taking note of how people reacted to it. It wasn't just Horikita. Almost everyone, even Hirata, wanted to reach Class A for the rewards. And yet, he was willing to give it up, even sabotage it for the rest of us, if it meant keeping us safe.

"No one asked you to baby us, Hirata."

Sudou had joined the conversation.

"Excuse me, Sudou-kun?"

"I didn't ask for your help. I don't think anyone else did either. So, get off your high horse, and stop pretending to care about us. We want to win, right?" He looked around the room, getting nods in return. "So, stop trying to baby us. Don't pretend to help us by holding us back!"

Everyone was momentarily stunned at the words coming out of Sudou's mouth. It wasn't like him to make such a speech, and yet he had done so. Even I was surprised to hear such mature words coming from his mouth, but he made a valid point.

"That's pretty easy for you to say, Sudou-kun. After all, Horikita-san's plan would be super good for you, right? But what about the rest of us, huh? Hirata-kun is just trying to help, and you're all being really rude."

"Hey, Shinohaha-san, they're kinda right so maybe shut up."

"Eh? Karuizawa-san?"

Shinohara, who had stood up to protect Hirata from Sudou's outburst, was taken aback at Karuizawa's defence of Horikita.

"Like, neither of us are the most athletic really. So, even if we try, we probably won't win, right? Really, I don't see the point in giving us a chance like Hirata has. Honestly, I think it'd be better for people like Ayanokouji-kun or Sudou-kun to have a chance, because really, we aren't gonna help much."

Another influential person had come to Horikita's defence, and Hirata's argument was beginning to crumble. A large amount of his support had come from Karuizawa's friends, and now they were having to choose between their friend or their crush.

It was completely stupid since neither of those options involved actual thinking about the situation.

"I understand your point, Horikita-san. It's important to try to win, I know that. But for the people who lose here, and there will be some, they will suffer on the next midterms." Hirata once again went for a middle ground argument. Logic was the only way to beat Horikita. She would never respond to emotional arguments. They would only serve to make her more stubborn.

"Then those students can simply study harder to make up for the

difference."

I cringed internally as she said those words. Her entire argument had been strong up until now, with growing support from the class. Horikita was presenting a participation table with the best for the class in mind, but with those words she showed how little she understood or cared. For someone intelligent like her, it was simply impossible to properly comprehend why people struggled academically.

'Just solve the equation' or 'it's so simple, C2H6 is Ethane, everyone knows that.' For intelligent people, it was impossible to understand why others struggled with learning. To them, it simply came naturally, and they wouldn't know the depth of the struggle. To say something so insensitive as to 'just study more', while true, would turn a lot of people away from her.

"As I thought," Hirata proclaimed, "you don't actually care about the class."

"Of course, I do. I'm working with the class's best interests in mind."

"No, you're working for yourself, not the class. You simply pretend that you care about the class, while you work for what you want in the fastest way possible. Yes, your strategy is the best option for reaching Class A, but at the cost of our classmates."

"The price we pay will be minimal. With a small amount of studying any negatives are minimal."

"And yet they don't affect you at all. It's very easy to choose the best option for yourself. There's still two and a half years left, Horikita-san. We should play it safe now, there will be plenty of time in the future to win."

"And what happens when there's a risk again? Will you say the same thing? Eventually, it will be too late, Hirata-kun. Now is the time to fight. We know the risks, small as they are, but we don't know what the future is. You would squander this chance out of a misguided fear."

"You are willing to sacrifice the class to achieve your goals. You don't care about anyone here."

"I care for the class, and I want US to reach Class A. But your disgusting cowardice in an attempt to coddle and protect people who didn't ask for your help is standing in our way."

Hirata stepped forward and grabbed Horikta's collar, only to have Sudou's hand grip firmly on his arm.

"Let Suzune go, Hirata."

Hirata turned to Sudou, a previously hidden darkness and anger now showing in his eyes. "Is this the sort of person you want to follow Sudou? She's giving you an advantage now, but if you

become a problem, she'll cast you off in an instant."

While some people flinched seeing the usually-content Hirata so serious, Sudou stood his ground.

"If that's the case, then I'll just work harder. I won't drag the class down so Suzune never has to make that choice. And also, don't forget that she already saved me, right at the start of the year. I reckon you don't know what you're talking about Hirata."

Nobody spoke, not willing to interrupt the tension, not even Chabashira who was sitting at the back of the classroom, looking out the window.

Eventually, Hirata slowly released his grip on Horikita, and once he did so did Sudou.

"I'm sorry for grabbing you, Horikita-san, but I won't take back what I said. Your plan is dangerous to the class, and I won't let you sacrifice anyone to get what you want. Your disregard for your classmates, treating them as a resource instead of people, it's a disgusting attitude."

Horikita snorted. "Your short-sightedness is causing the problem. If you can't accept a minimal risk like this one, then you have no purpose being in this school."

Hirata stared back at Horikita, aghast. "You're just as bad as Ayanokouji-kun and his 'acceptable losses'. No one in this class is expendable, and I won't condone a plan that will cause problem for individuals as sacrifices, no matter how little."

Horikita and Hirata stood across from each other at the podium, lightning flickering between their eyes.

Eventually, Horikita broke it, and looked to my direction. "You brought up an interesting point, Hirata-kun. I wonder what our resident genius has to say on the topic?"

Kouenji, who had been napping until this point, suddenly picked himself up.

"Well, I see you have finally recognised my true perfection, Horikita-girl. It is as you say, I too have an opinion on this fascinating debate."

The tension in the room broke instantly courtesy of Kouenji's ridiculous nature, and an irritated Horikita turned her attention to him.

"I wasn't talking about you, but go ahead, Kouenji-kun," she sighed.

Kouenji pulled out a comb and began to style his golden locks. "Well, it's rather simple, isn't it? Neither of you have the correct participation table, since I am not competing against demon-boy."

"Excuse me?" Hirata seemingly didn't believe what he had just heard.

"Was I not clear enough? I and Ayanokouji-boy will run in the same events. The rest of the table is fairly obvious, but I can understand such imperfect creatures as yourselves not being able to calculate that."

Hirata had his head in his hands, and Horikita just ignored the words and turned back to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, what's your opinion?"

I looked around at the expecting faces turned in my direction.

"You're both idiots."

I went back to reading my book.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun, could you explain what you mean, please?"

Kikyou, as the only person in the class who had any semblance of experience managing me, and the usual mediator finally spoke up. Clearly, she had been afraid of taking a side in the conversation so far, and alienating herself from half the class, but here was a chance for her to prove her value to friends.

I sighed, closing my book. "Clearly, you've forgotten the most important aspect of the situation."

"Would you care to enlighten us then?" Horikita almost growled at me. Understandable, since I had just insulted them both.

"The rules state that we have to come to a consensus. Neither of you are going to back down, nor will you use the others idea. Nothing will get decided at this rate, hence the term idiots."

"Then what would you suggest, Ayanokouji-kun? I'm not going to let Horikita play with our classmates. You might have no problem with that, but we're people, not resources for victory." Actually, Hirata, that is exactly what you are.

"If you took a vote, you'll find the class is almost completely split. Not enough of a majority on either side to justify using one of those plans. So clearly, you need a new one, that finds a middle ground. Both of you know this, everyone knows this, but you're too afraid to back down. Kouenji even said it's possible, but you ignored him anyway just because you dislike him. It's pathetic. We are at war. Do not forget it. Wasting time with stupid arguments like this just shows that we deserve to be Class D."

There was no argument that could reasonably be made against what I had said, but they didn't have to like it. What Horikita and Hirata had been arguing over for the past half an hour, I had dismantled with a couple of sentences that they were too afraid to accept as fact.

"Oh, and I'll support whoever puts me in the same events as Kouenji."

"No." "Absolutely not."

The one thing they could agree on was the wrong choice. It truly

was a shame.

While it was still smart to condense out best runners into a few races, it was still important to separate the very best, those who could all consistently take first. Putting Sudou, Kouenji and I in the same race was purposefully giving up on first place rewards. But I was going to do it anyway.

Thre was a second underlying message that most people didn't know. While it was clear there was a tension between the two class leaders, the true depth that their conflict ran was unknown to most, and as such my offer for support seemed benign to most of the class. To Horikita and Hirata though, it was an important thing to consider.

I wouldn't help out either of them though. I hadn't set them up to fight just to help one side win, but it was a threat they would have to keep in mind.

"I think what Kiyotaka-kun said was right." Kikyou hesitantly voiced her suggestion. "Here, I've written up my own draft, that sort-of fits the middle ground he suggested." She shared with the class through messages an image of a participation table I had created last night for this exact purpose. Kikyou would be the one to pull the class back together. "I'm sorry, Kiyotaka-kun, but we can't just put two of our best athletes in the same event." She apologised to me, but I had already known this was the case, having made it myself.

As my classmates got out their phones and began to look over the new suggestion, there was a ripple of approval throughout the room, as the new participation table was read.

It wasn't a finalised version, not even close, but it was a rough guess based on what we currently knew about athleticism in the class. Of course, there would need to be changes, as students participated in different events, or showed aptitudes we didn't know about, but it was certainly a good starting point. With some experimenting, it could end up being a good participation table. It was certainly a good template to work with.

"I suppose I can agree to this strategy. Once we've done some training to determine how to set it up most effectively," Horikita begrudgingly admitted. It wasn't quite her full-frontal assault in order for the best class results, but it also wasn't as careful and cautious as Hirata's version.

"I'm amenable to something like this, also with a few changes." Hirata also threw his support behind Kikyou's proposal.

Kouenji threw me a knowing look, accompanied with a wide smirk, to which I sighed and began to read my book again.

The class discussion began again, even still with some of the same

problems. Shinohara in particular was advocating for more of Hirata's ideals to be added into the table, and she wasn't alone.

"Hold on a minute, this still leaves slower people high and dry! Privileges only go down to third place. I don't want to lose my shot!" This was a sentiment she shared along with some of the other less-athletically inclined girls, who refused to give up completely.

"I'm sorry, Shinohara-san, but really, I'm pretty sure this is the best way. It's kinda the only thing everyone can agree on, and like, it's best for the class overall." Karuizawa once again came to bite back against Shinohara. Considering they had been best friends at one point, it was an impressive change.

"I know it's for the class's sake, but I don't want to lose out on private points."

"Like you're gonna win anyway." Sudou dismissed Shinohara's complain in an instant.

"Excuse me?!" She stood up and stomped over to Sudou, rather comically due to the height difference.

Sudou simply looked down at her with disinterest.

"What do you want, Shinohara? You want us to baby you, put you in the easiest race so you get some points? Are you gonna take the blame if the class loses because of you?"

"Well..."

"Shinohara-san. We can't make exceptions for anyone. I'm sorry but following this plan might be the best strategy right now. I'll be more than happy to do some extra tutoring for anyone who's worried about their scores on the midterms." Hirata put his foot down. Despite his dislike of Horikita's views, he wasn't going to allow someone to pull the class apart over a selfish desire like Shinohara's. His goal, after all, was to protect everyone here.

"If Hirata-kun says so."

Fortunately, there were enough level-headed people to argue back, and soon enough the class had decided on their participation table, jointly backed by a reluctant Horikita, a hesitant Hirata and a cheerful Kikyou.

Of course, I had already assured that mine would be the one used, and not the one we had just agreed on. It was sure to cause some problems on the day, but for now class unity had been restored, and Hirata and Horikita had drawn lines in the proverbial sand.

"By the way, Kouenji. Are you really going to cooperate in any events?"

"Oh? Are you doubting my resolve, Horikita-girl?"

"No, I simply have experience with your disinterest."

Everyone remembered back to the island exam, where Kouenji

retired early, and to the Zodiac exam, where he answered early to get out of the test.

"HA! Don't concern yourself over such a trivial matter, Horikita-girl. Everything is going according to plan. I can assure you; I will participate when needed."

Horikita gave Kouenji a dubious look but gave up trying to convince him.

It wasn't long before the homeroom session ended, and we could go home for the day. Although we had solved the problem of the participation table, there was a noticeable tension in the air. Two of the leading figures in the class had almost come to blows, and there was a very clear divide now, between who supported who.

I just wondered how long it would be before our class collapsed completely.

Authors Notes:

So, a bit of conflict in Class D now. Horikita vs Hirata with the splitting of their ideals.

Honestly picking up a lot of fun stuff as I reread this volume, it's always just felt meh to me, just another story, but actually analysing it a bit makes it a lot more interesting. For example, conversation between Horikita and Ayanokouji:

"You said so yourself, didn't you? Physical ability will determine victory or defeat."

"But there are other aspects to the competition besides physical ability, too," she said.

"Okay. So, on the day of the festival, should I give the Class B and C students stomachaches and make them bow out? If I do that, we'll have a total victory. We'll win by an overwhelming margin," I said.

"Stop joking."

Mans wasn't joking. Never picked up on that.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 4 - Training

Until the Sports Festival, our physical education periods had been turned into free practice time.

Which meant at the first opportunity Sudou had dragged all the boys out measure our grip strength. For most events the best way to determine participants was either volunteers or testing running, but Sudou had decided that grip strength was the ultimate deciding factor in the tug-of-war participant list.

And so, he had gathered all of those he thought had potential, and requisitioned two devices from the school to use. It was very strange seeing him being so proactive, but clearly Sudou had changed significantly. He had been nominated to lead the training for the class, and had taken on the job with great seriousness. This was his one chance to show off and prove his value, which was why Sudou was putting in so much effort. For is exam, he was one of the leaders.

"Right! All the boys from the class are here, and we're gonna figure out who the strongest of ya are!"

"Don't you think we should have the girls here, Sudou?"

Hirata was still rather cold when it came to Sudou, possibly since he was a direct opponent in his mini-war, but ever the reasonable man, Hirata didn't let it affect their working relationship too much.

"Eh? Why the hell should we? We need the four strongest for the four-way tug-of-war, so why the hell should we get them?"

Hirata gave a visible sigh, obviously not keen on the conversation. He wasn't so much an advocate for gender equality, as giving the girls a chance too. At least, he wasn't delusional enough to think that there was a girl in our class capable of matching up with the boys we would be facing. Not to say there weren't any strong girls, just there were enough boys stronger.

"Fine. Hand out the devices then."

Smiling with his success at reasoning with Hirata, Sudou passed one of the devices to him, and kept the other for himself.

"Right! I'm definitely gonna be one of the tug-of-war guys, and make Suzune's plan work! Uraaah!" Sudou said with an appropriate bellow.

His shoulders shook while he tightly gripped the device in his right hand. The numbers on the digital readout shot up rapidly. In

an instant they climbed to 50, then 60, then over 70. In the end, the number on the digital display was 82.4 kilograms.

It was an impressive result, far higher than what the average probably was. Sudou was in no way feeble.

"Wow, that's incredible Sudou!" Even Miyaki was really impressed by Sudou's strength.

"Here, Kouenji. You do it now!" Sudou handed the grip strength device to Kouenji, who looked at it for a second and laughed.

"Ha! If you insist on having me embarrass you, Red-kun, who am I to deny you."

"Tch. Do you best, idiot." Sudou did an impressive job of ignoring the insult, and handed the device to Kouenji. Everyone stopped, even Hirata, who was writing down his score of 57.9, to watch as the bold man grabbed the device from Sudou's hands.

He squeezed it slightly and the number jumped up to 43.6

"Eh?! What the hell?"

We all watched as Kouenji slowly but steadily increased his grip, and the number kept going up and up, passing Hirata's and even passing Sudou's without any sign of slowing down.

Eventually, it began to reduce in growth, and Kouenji, visibly struggling for the first time that I had seen, was gripping the device with all his might at 115.7 kilograms.

"What the FUCK Kouenji!"

Everyone was in awe of the insane number, almost high enough to break records. In a few years, once his body developed more, I had no doubt that Kouenji would do so. He was only 15 right now, and still had far to go.

"Yes, I truly am a perfect being! None can match my potential. Disgusting and insignificant classmates, you waste my time with this tiny competition."

Another famous Kouenji-ism came out of his mouth, but everyone let it slide. At least this time, Kouenji had proven that he did deserve to say such things.

"Demon-boy, time to prove your value." Saying this, Kouenji passed me the device, letting the score fall away. "I'm expecting a challenge, at least." There was a dangerous look in his eyes, and at this junction I didn't dare risk upsetting him.

Shrugging, I took the device and squeezed it, letting the numbers climb rapidly.

"Wait, you too Ayanokouji?!"

Miyaki was someone I hadn't spent much time around, and unlike Hirata or Sudou, he didn't have a good idea of how strong I really was. The device that Hirata had used was slowly being passed around the rest of the boys invited, but no one was really paying

any attention to their scores.

Unlike Kouenji I didn't bother putting on a show, and increasing it as slowly as possible. It still took a while to reach my top strength, but eventually, I couldn't go any further.

"121.4"

"Well, it seems you truly live up to your name. Ha! I am still the perfect existence though, to every ordinary person on the planet."

Saying this, Kouenji returned to polishing his fingernails, clearly satisfied with our little competition. The rest of the group remained in awe, until Hirata spoke up.

"Well, I guess we have the four people for the tug-of-war. Kouenji-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, Sudou-kun and myself. Miyaki, do you mind being a sub in case one of us drops out?"

It was a reasonable request, and an important safety to have in place. Miyaki was the only other person to produce reasonable results, with a 56.8, and having him as a backup would make a lot of sense.

"Sure. To be honest I didn't think I'd be so outclassed. Heh, we have a lot of strong people in our class," he noted.

"Yeah. But if only some o' them were more helpful," Sudou exclaimed, giving me and Kouenji a glare, that we both ignored.

The rest of the boys, led by Sudou and Hirata, began to discuss the participants in other events like the pole toppling and scavenger hunt. The girls and boys had slpit the number of participants for the latter, since it was impossible to show any particular aptitude when it came to luck.

I walked away from the arguments and lay down on the ground. The results with the strength test were exactly as expected, and matched what I had on the real participation table. The only question I had was Hirata or Miyaki, and it seemed I chose correctly.

There was no point squabbling over such things, since it was already set, but no one else knew that.

Instead, I pondered on Ichinose and her class. The last time I had cooperated directly with her was with Sudou's trial. I wondered if she still remembered all the details of that incident, and her promise to me.

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The next few weeks progressed as expected, mostly ordinary but broken up with training sessions for the upcoming festival.

Both the boys and girls had been practicing diligently, and the class had come up with their participation table. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't significantly different from what we would be using on the day, but I had some slight improvements in mine that were

discarded due to personal preference interfering with the classes decision making.

Every few days Hirata, Horikita, Sudou and Kikyou had been meeting with the leaders of Class A as our de facto representatives and planning strategies. I hadn't been privy to those meetings, having made it a point early on that I had no interest, but I made sure to keep up to date with the strategies.

For Capture-the-Flag, Tamaire, Tug-of-War and the Cavalry fight, Class A and D had shared with each other their list of participants, as well as coming up with strategies.

The plans weren't bad, on the contrary, they were as good as one could plan ahead of time. The order for tug of war, the formations used in the cavalry fight, the students defending and attacking in capture the flag. All of it had been intelligently planned out, and if it was a fair fight, I would have high hopes of winning.

Our leaders had highlighted threats and indicated targets, optimally decided who was strongest to attack or hold people back. Really, they had taken everything into consideration, except for foul play.

According to Kikyou, the general group consensus was 'we can't plan for foul play, so if we see it on the day we'll just report it. They can't try anything anyway, right?'

Apparently Horikita felt that was as stupid as I thought it was, because she took my reaction a step further and actually slammed her head into the desk upon hearing that.

It was a fine line the group was walking, after all. They couldn't give away too many strategies, or who were the strongest or fastest, without telling Class A too much about us. Despite both being on the red team, we were still enemies, and would be competing to not lose Class Points. Sure, there needed to be a sense of teamwork, but too much trust would only hurt us in the end.

The only consolation was that Class A had to work with the same handicap, although that wouldn't really matter.

Everyone was putting so much effort into the upcoming festival, when it didn't really matter. At this junction in time, there was a week until the day, and it was in this week that we could now submit our finalised participation tables. During this time, I had made a few changes to mine, updating it slightly as students revealed talents, I hadn't expected them to poses, but in the sense of training, it was ultimately pointless.

There was no way anyone could improve enough to win a race in the next few weeks. Sure, you could train, but any meaningful improvements came over long periods of time.

There were things that made sense. Training for the three legged

race was essential in understanding the connection with your partner and synchronising properly. Likewise, the cavalry battle was important to be prepared for, since it was an unusual method of moving around, and without proper preparation a team would be steamrolled by a prepared one.

Unfortunately, when it came to the three-legged mixed gender race, I wasn't sure if we would win. Since I'd drawn up the participation table, and was aiming for the MVP prize, I'd put myself into that spot. The problem was that I had been rejected by the class for that role, in the place of Hirata, since the fastest girls who would run in it were more inclined to run with him than me. Averaging out the speeds, Hirata was selected, and I was shafted.

Which meant that instead of being able to train and practice with the fastest girl not named Horikita, who seemed completely incapable of running as a pair, Onodera, I had to practice in secret with the only person who knew I was submitting my own table.

On the day of the festival, Kikyou and I would be the ones running. Although she wasn't the fastest girl in the class, we had been practicing in secret for a few weeks at this point, and together we were fairly good. It was likely even that we would win the race ourselves, even up against the best of other classes.

We had good chemistry together, and a part of me was even glad at the situation turning out this way, that I would have a chance to run with my partner.

Kikyou wasn't slow by any means, and while she wasn't the fastest girl in the class, she was certainly above average. On top of that, she had developed the skill to allow me to somewhat carry her as we ran. Outwardly, it appeared that we were both running in sync, but she held on tight, and I lifted her slightly above the ground, to the point where her feet would scrape, and I would do almost all the work. Really, it was cheating, as both people were supposed to be running, but upon reviewing recordings of us running, the cheat was almost indistinguishable. It was much slower than my best running, but we achieved speeds that weren't possible for us trying to run in sync.

Our class might complain at first that they didn't have the fastest combination at first, but hopefully they would get over it once we ran.

From what I'd been hearing about the cavalry though, I was getting somewhat concerned. Amikura wouldn't stop making changes and had now drawn up the battlegrounds into a coordinate grid and was attempting to plan army manoeuvres that only worked with large numbers of soldiers. Yet, there was no stopping her, despite the efforts of the leadersip members. When it came down to

the event, most people would act on instinct and work in teams to target weak points. I doubted anyone would listen to the girl screaming 'Alpha team to third quadrant for a pincer manoeuvre! Let's fuck em up!'

I was dragged out of my thoughts when I felt a shadow fall over me. The class had agreed on a weekend training session, and I had shown up at least, but was taking a nap on the hill next to the oval.

"Don't you look relaxed. Shouldn't you be practicing?"

I had heard him approaching, but since I wasn't sure who it was, I didn't bother to make a move. Upon hearing Nagumo's voice I still didn't react.

"To think that I'd be given the silent treatment. Ahh, I'm really hurt, Ayanokouji."

Realising he wouldn't go away until he got what he wanted, I cracked an eye open and looked up at the smirking blonde standing over me.

"What do you want, Nagumo?"

"Why, to commend you on your classes preparation of course! They're certainly putting in a lot of effort."

"Are you suggesting that effort was pointless?" There had been an odd tone to his voice, as if he was mocking our admittedly mostly-pointless efforts.

"Obviously. You have no idea what's coming, do you? It's such a shame, but in the end, you can't win against me. Not when it really matters." The superior look of superiority crossed his face, Nagumo relishing in the fact that I lacked information of my impending doom.

"I'm competing against my grade, aren't I? Why would you be the one to beat me?" I innocently asked.

"Don't play games with me, Ayanokouji. You're strong and smart, yes. You put a stop to my games, but soon enough I'll be the Student Council President. You can't stand alone against me. I have the might of the school on my side, the power to influence other grades. Your defeat is inevitable."

I sighed. He was a rather dramatic man. "I guess I should run away crying then."

A toothy, vicious grin. "Kneel before me in public, and maybe I'll spare your class. It's an open offer, for this exam or the next. Think about it."

"You really are confident, aren't you?" I remarked.

"Confidence backed up by evidence. Your own class hates you, Ayanokouji. How long do you think it'll be before they cast you out?"

"Hate is a very strong word."

Nagumo laughed at my reply. "Ha! Fair enough, a general dislike then. Enjoy it while it lasts. Sooner or later, you'll lose."

"If only I could," I sighed.

"And you call me confident! You've got it pretty easy this time, being on the red team and all. Don't worry, I'll make sure to pay you back with interest for everything you've done."

I pulled myself up from where I was sitting and looked across at the Vice President.

"Do your worst Nagumo. But you aren't on my level."

"You know, I really can't tell if it's an act, or if you believe what you say. I don't get someone as dumb as you, Ayanokouji," Nagumo noted, amused. "I honestly don't know what you are."

"If that's true... if you don't know what I am... maybe your best course would be to tread lightly."

"Wow! Incredible! I got chills, that was insane. If only you could add a bit of energy into your voice, I'd be actually scared!" Nagumo clapped his hands together

"Play you games, Nagumo. Move your little pieces around and scheme and feel smart. You're certainly impressive, I can't deny that. But challenge me, and you will lose."

"Oh? And how will you do that?" He seemed genuinely curious to how I would crush him.

In response I reached into my pocket and found the thing I'd taken to carrying around with me.

"It's rather simple. Alone, you're worthless. I'll just cut off everyone around you." I pulled out the custom minifigure that I had stolen from a truck with Kiryuuin months ago, holding it out so Nagumo could recognise it. At his sharp breath, I knew he understood. "I'll start with her." Saying this, I pulled its head off, and turned to walk away.

As I did so, Nagumo didn't respond. He knew what I held was a rather powerful weapon, and while it couldn't get him into real trouble, the social damage would be serious.

Yes, without his support, without his influence, Nagumo was weak. His grade, while seemingly pacified, were sharks in the water. He threw them food, and let them live, but if I made him bleed, they would have no problem biting the hand that fed them.

Too many mistakes against me, and Nagumo would be eaten by his own followers.

That wasn't something to bother with today though. His grade was an issue with the future. Now, tomorrow, I would have the meeting to begin the war. I had a promise to fulfil, that I made to the very doll in my hand.

Sighing, I slipped the now headless Ichinose Honami minifigure

back into my pocket and walked back towards the dorms.

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"You're late, Ayanokouji-boy. To request my presence, and to waste my gracious nature by delaying our meeting, how inconsiderate."

I sighed, and closed the door behind me, walking out onto the roof of the student dorms. There was a breeze blowing, and Kouenji was leaning on the railing opposite the door, golden locks fluttering behind him. Despite his quirks, he truly did appear as impressive as he claimed right now, the golden-orange sunset bathing him in light.

"Sorry. It couldn't be helped."

I had been delayed in a conversation with Sakayanagi beforehand, and even though I was only a few minutes late to our meeting, that was still enough to ruin a conversation with Kouenji.

"Not to worry, my magnanimous nature is fair enough to understand the inconsistencies of your life."

"Thanks."

I walked over to him and leaned against the rail, facing the opposite direction of Kouenji, looking down at the school grounds. The sun was slowly descending, and shadows were crossing the grounds as darkness. Tomorrow would be my gamble, the day I drew the line in the sand, when new standards were set.

Really, this could be considered the last day without a constant battle.

"So, do you have any interest in enlightening me as to why you requested this meeting?"

"I'm sure you already know."

"Ha! Of course, a perfect existence would already understand."

Yes, as Kouenji had recognised, there was only one thing worth me discussing with him right now.

"So?"

I could feel the smirk from where Kouenji was leaning.

"You've given me no incentive to do so."

That was true. I had done nothing to get Kouenji to agree to my request, and there wasn't anything I could do right now that he would want.

"It would be a great contribution to the class?" I half-heartedly tried. I had no expectation for Kouenji to buy that, but it was worth a shot.

"You mock me, demon-boy. I don't care to contribute out of the goodness of my heart. I am a perfect existence, but a perfect person does not give for nothing."

Kouenji wouldn't be motivated by other people's opinions, nor by

intangible rewards. I could pay him points, but I would need to save them in case people had to be replaced as a safety measure.

"I guess it's a matter of pride, then. As well as the MVP rewards."

I turned to face the man, looking up at him in his yellow eyes, the smirk never leaving his face.

He didn't reply for a while, and for a moment I began to fear that I had completely misread the situation. Kouenji was difficult enough to deal with, and if he didn't agree to this, then I would have to make some drastic changes.

But it seemed my fears were unfounded.

"Ha! Yes, a bold plan, but I accept your challenge, Ayanokouji-boy. Nothing can hold me back. Not unless I choose to, and I'm expecting the same from you. That is my price."

This conversation had concluded before it even began, both myself and Kouenji having forseen what I would ask, and how he would respond. And yet, due to his nature, it was still important to confirm such details. Kouenji was a wily student, and I could never completely count on him to act as expected.

But he was also a man of his word. If I had learned anything about him this year, it was that he wouldn't go back on a deal, not without reason.

"Good. This does benefit you after all, since Class D is already at a disadvantage."

"Of that, I am completely aware. Truly, Class D is in a troublesome spot, and even someone as impressive as you cannot save us alone. Very well, in accordance with our deal, the Great Kouenji Rokusuke shall provide Class D with his excellence."

Kouenji moved to leave, heading towards the roof door that I came through minutes ago.

"I'm glad to be able to trust you," I called out sarcastically.

He stopped and turned to me, the impressive man filling the doorway.

"Oh? But haven't you realised yet, Ayanokouji?"

"Realised what?" There were a lot of things he could mean.

"Of course you could rely on me. There is no one in Class D as true to their nature as I am."

In a sense the mysterious man was right. Everyone else in Class D was a living contradiction, at least on some level. Out of everyone, there was no one who acted as themselves as much as Kouenji did.

Authors Notes:

Reltively short chapters right now, just because there's a bunch of setup that needs to be split. Kouenji and Ayanokouji making a deal, which hopefully can save them from the impending doom coming

their way.

Grip strength was taken from actual world records, not quite breaking them yet but close. After all, as far as I understand it, it's actually unsafe to build muscles under a certain age, so Kouenji and Ayanokouji still have potential to train even further. At least that's based on my very limited understanding of the human body and exercise.

Can Ichinose survive? Probably not, it is Ayano-god after all. I don't know if it was clear enough to pick up on, but Arc 2 Chapter 6, the heist with Kiryuuin, is when he stole the Minifigure. My headcanon is that Nagumo gets them custom made to play with his pets. I was intending to save it for a much later date, but it just fit in here for serious tension, and I couldn't not use it.

Fun fact, Yahiko is described as a 'natural leader whom others tend to follow' by the school. Honestly would not have picked it, but I guess that's why he made Class A. His card doesn't show anything good at all, literally 'C, C, D, D, B'.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 5 - Blackmail

Yesterday, I had asked a favour of Sakayanagi.

One of the biggest problems I was facing right now was the divide between Ichinose and myself. The situation was almost comical as to how much she was avoiding me, especially since we were supposed to be teammates, but I was content to let it go. Now though, I needed her attention and the easiest way to get her to join a conversation was if Sakayanagi asked.

Utterly ridiculous.

And so, I walked into a karaoke room to find a petite girl with a cane sitting across from a dragon. Both looked completely at ease, although I was sure their minds were anything but.

"Speak of the fucking devil and he appears. What the hell did ya' want, Ayanokouji?"

"Fufufu calm down Ryuuen. We're still waiting for one more guest after all."

I was surprised to find that Sakayanagi hadn't informed Ryuuen of what has happening, or at least who she invited. I hadn't in fact informed her of the purpose of the meeting

I walked over and took a seat on the last remaining couch, gaining a small smirk from Sakayanagi. She realised the implications of the situation, and I for one was interested in how it would go down.

"Someone ordered food," I noted. There was a plate of chips and some drinks in the middle of the room.

"Feel free to take what you want. I'm in a generous mood, my entire world has opened. The power of love is amazing Ayanokouji, it creates so many weaknesses kukukuku"

Ryuuen fell back cackling to himself, and I sighed in pity for Amikura. She truly had gone too far already, and probably had no idea what she was dealing with.

It wasn't my problem though and would definitely resolve in an entertaining manner. Shrugging I reached forward. I took a potato chip and ate it.

There wasn't much to discuss, and so we waited in silence for the few minutes until there came a knock on the door.

"Sakayanagi-san, is this the right room?"

I heard the bright voice of Ichinose from outside the door.

"Come in, Ichinose-san. We've been waiting for you."

The door slid open to reveal the strawberry blond girl of Class A.

"Sorry for making you wait!"

She walked in and faltered slightly upon seeing me. It was a predicament she was in, and Sakayanagi was giggling quietly to herself upon observing it.

There were three couches in the room, each big enough for two people. Sakayanagi, Ryuuen and I had each taken one. And instead of making a decision, Ichinose chose to remain standing, staying in front of the television in the room.

To be fair, Ryuuen had taken up his entire couch with his relaxed position.

"Right, we're all here now. Can we get on with it, I got a date with Mako-chan next."

I kept a close eye on Ichinose as he said this, picking up on her slight flinch. Clearly, she wasn't a fan of that partnership.

"Yes, so would you mind explaining why you've called us here, Sakayanagi-san? If you wanted to meet with the leaders of the Red Team, unfortunately I'm the only one here."

Before Sakayanagi could explain, Ryuuen blinked in astonishment and sat up properly.

"Wait, what the fuck are you saying? He's not a leader? Ah, you're all retarded aren't you! Kukukuku!"

Ichinose sighed heavily. "Ayanokouji-kun has proved most uncooperative. But if you want to discuss something related to the exam, Sakayanagi-san, you've invited the wrong guests."

Three pairs of eyes turned to the petite girl, who was still quietly laughing to herself.

"You misunderstand, Ichinose-san. I wasn't the one to call this meeting. Ayanokouji-kun was."

"Ah. I see." The lack of enthusiasm in Ichinose's voice was clear to everyone present.

"Wait, wait, I'm so fucking confused now. Loli-girl, you were the one to call us here, right? So, what the hell are you talking about?" Ryuuen was getting more and more confused by the minute

"I think it's rather obvious dragon-boy. Ichinose-san would rather meet with us than her own teammate Ayanokouji-kun. So, he had to resort to asking me for a favour fufufu." Sakayanagi explained the convoluted situation.

"Wait, I never agreed to a favour," I protested. "You said you'd do this out of the goodness of your heart." But my complaint was ignored.

"You." Ryuuen pointed at me. "What the hell did you do to make her distrust you that much. Poor Honami, having to work with a

monster."

I shrugged. "I just made the situation clear. Ichinose didn't appreciate that very much."

"I also don't appreciate the three of you talking about me like I'm not here." Ichinose interrupted our three-way conversation. "Please, share what it was you wanted to talk about Ayanokouji-kun. At least can we do it in private?"

"But it pertains to them as well. You did come here alone without telling anyone, didn't you?"

Finally, Ichinose made the choice to take a seat on the same couch as me. Ryuuen snorted in amusement, but I ignored that.

"Yes, like Sakayanagi-san asked, I came here alone. But I don't see what we would have to discuss with our opponents," she clarified.

"I'm hurt, Honami. What could I have done that would alienate you from a conversation?" Ryuuen cried.

In response, Ichinose simply tilted her head to the side questioningly. "I have no problem with a conversation. I'd rather it has value and isn't a waste of my time, and I don't see any benefit to this one."

I sighed. This banter could continue on for hours if we left them alone. Ichinose and Ryuuen were both apt enough at word games, and neither of them were willing to cave to the other.

"Just out of curiosity, what odds would you give the White Team of winning, across all year levels," I interrupted.

"Hmm, if I was forced to give an estimate, perhaps around 30%? It would take a monumental effort from the first years, but it's certainly doable." Sakayanagi gave an accurate summation of the situation.

"Yeah, it's kinda bullshit that the Red Team is so stacked, but don't think we're just gonna give up. Well, the loli isn't, I've got to spoil my girlfriend," Ryuuen teased with a smirk. Ichinose, who was usually good at hiding her emotions, was getting easily agitated by the idea of Ryuuen and Amikura dating. Clearly, she should understand Amikura's side, and would hopefully have warned her about the danger, but someone hadn't listened.

"Right. It's a tough spot. I'm sure you'd enjoy it if the first year collapsed then, just the miracle you need to win."

Of course, I wasn't going to let them steamroll us, but giving my opponents and advantage was fun.

Silence filled the room at my suggestion, before Ryuuen burst out laughing, a smile etched onto Sakayanagi's face. The two of them understood already, yet Ichinose gave me a strange look of confusion.

"What are you talking about, Ayanokouji-kun? We're going to do

our best to win. Are you going to sabotage us?"

I shook my head, leaning back onto the couch with a new handful of chips. "I'm not going to do anything, Ichinose. You're the one who will sabotage the Red Team. Class A is going to come last in the sports festival."

Sakayanagi clapped her hands in excitement. "Fufufu to think this is how the conversation would go. What could you possibly have done to warrant the masterpieces wrath, Ichinose-san?"

"I..."

"It's not her fault. Ichinose is just the collateral damage." I turned to look her in the eyes. "You sided with Nagumo. For that, you're my enemy, no matter what side we're supposedly on for the Sports Festival."

"Are you trying to fight Nagumo?"

"Nagumo is trying to fight me. But I'm not going to sit around and let it happen."

Ichinose sighed. "It seems this was indeed a waste of time. I won't be betraying my class, or whatever you're suggesting Ayanokouji-kun."

Ichinose stood up, ready to leave the room.

"What, so that's it? You were just gonna ask her to sabotage Class A, and you thought it'd work? Honestly expected more from you." Ryuuen wasn't impressed by the waste of time, although there was a sense of amusement in his tone. Clearly, he thought this wasn't over yet.

"Fufufu Ichinose-san. Did you really think Ayanokouji-kun would leave it there? I'd advise you not to walk away, because I'm sure whatever he has planned in retaliation would be terrible."

Ichinose ignored their remarks and headed for the door. The instant her hand touched the handle I called out to her.

"Walk out of this room and I will destroy one of your classmates."

That got her to pause and turn her head back to me.

"To think you'd say something so horrible, Ayanokouji-kun. I don't think even you can do that on a whim."

"Of course, I can't with a whim. But you've given me enough time. I send one message, and within the next few days they will drop out of ANHS."

That wasn't quite accurate. There was a chance it could happen, but I couldn't guarantee it. More likely, there would be issues, but for the actual impacts of my threat, they were in reality non-existent. It was my presence and history that was the true force behind my threat.

"I got rid of Ike and Yamauchi because they were problems. Don't doubt I can't do the same."

Finally, Ichinose turned back to me, frustration on her face. I wondered how far I could push her in this session. What emotions would she experience? The kind and bubbly girl was already gone, could I break her completely?

"Explain." Her voice was deathly quiet, but in the soundproofed room, it was clear.

"Do you remember the day we first met, Ichinose? You tried to be helpful and poke around in my mind."

"Kukuku you tried to play mind games with the monster? Fucking idiot."

"Fufufu truly a foolish girl. You aren't even close to his level."

Ichinose ignored the peanut gallery and focused solely on me, the immediate threat.

"How could I forget." There was a lack of energy in her voice now, possibly seeing what I was heading for.

"I distinctly remember you asking me for a favour behind the school. I wonder what would happen if the story of that got out."

What I was referring to was the confession of Shiranami Chihiro, a sweet and quiet girl, very tame and shy. To a girl like that, rumours about her sexuality and even just a confession in general would be enough to shatter her world, bringing it down on her. She didn't have the mental fortitude to stand up to that, as far as I knew.

"You wouldn't..."

"Secrets kept are weapons wasted. You were stupid to ask for my help, Ichinose. And now someone else will pay the price for your stupidity."

Ichinose didn't reply to that, slumping back against the door, a defeated look on her face.

"Shit, what the fuck is this secret, Ayanokouji? You feel like sharing?"

"That depends on Ichinose." I stood up and walked over to her, towering over her emotionally battered form. "You're going to give us your participation table. You aren't going to tell anyone about this. You won't make any changes to it, nor warn anyone. Do that, and I won't tell anyone the story of that day."

Having finished my piece, I returned to my couch and had some more chips. Ryuuen had good taste. Salt and Vinegar was my favourite flavour.

"You really have a way with women, Ayanokouji-kun. I wonder if you could break me like that." Sakayanagi had a strange fire in her eyes that unnerved me a little.

But before I could respond, Ichinose picked herself up.

"Do you really think I'll cave to your demands?"

I shrugged. "I'm pretty confident. After all, you're happy to choose your classmates over points, right? It's just the same as the cruise."

"No, you're wrong. My class is strong enough to get through that story, no matter what you think."

"Are you so confident, Ichinose? When Ayanokouji-kun makes a claim, I tend to believe it. Fufufu if he thinks this person will drop out, then they probably will."

Neither Ryuuen nor Sakayanagi knew the story. I wasn't going to give up such leverage, but they could make educated guesses.

Ichinose looked even more downcast at Sakayanagi adding her support to my argument, before the light of a new idea appeared in her eyes. Pulling herself up, she looked at me with a slight grin.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you owe Class A a favour. I'm using it now, to make you stop this foolish sabotage."

She was incredibly proud of thinking of that, I could see. Unfortunately...

"First, that favour isn't enforceable. And second, I owe Amikura a favour. Not a weak girl like you."

"No, but..."

I sighed. As expected, she was resisting this with everything she had, but there was no way out. The normal Ichinose would have realised the flaw in that bargaining before she even tried it, but her mind had already been influenced by her emotions. Right now, her rational thinking was severely hampered, crushed by fear for her classmate.

"Did Nagumo not warn you?"

"Huh?" My unexpected question drove her out of her thought process.

"I told him yesterday that I would break you. Clearly, he didn't, so he probably sees this as a test for you. I guess you fail then."

"Ichinose-san, you should give up. Your conscience won't allow you to sacrifice a class member, everyone here knows that. Forget this shameful act and give up."

"Nah, Honami don't listen. Keep being a bitch, it's really funny kukuku"

Ryuuen and Sakayanagi had very different priorities. But the constant pressure from three people was enough to wear down anyone.

"You lose, Ichinose. Give up the participation table, or their life will be ruined. What's more important, getting to Class A, or saving your classmates."

Impressively, the debate Ichinose was struggling with was the same one that Hirata and Horikita had had weeks ago at the start of our preparation. Were acceptable losses a thing? And to Ichinose,

the answer was no. She was willing to give up class points, as seen on the cruise, but class members were a different matter.

I wondered what Amikura would do, if given this choice?

"Fine," Ichinose almost spat. Frustration and finally anger had come out in her face. "Have the participation table. Yes, to protect my classmates I'll do this. I guess you know me well, Ayanokouji. I guess I'm too weak to protect my friends."

Ichinose pulled out her phone and sent a message of an image to the three other people in the room. Pulling out my phone, I confirmed it was real.

"Understand that if you tell anyone, or if it's changed and we don't know, then the secret comes out." I tilted my head slightly, noticing her rage. "I'm sure Nagumo would be proud of his protégé's class collapsing. Maybe he will abandon you now." I sighed. Nagumo wouldn't give up his Honami. His lustful gaze when talking about her was all too clear. "But I doubt it. He's too stupid to know when to discard someone useless."

"Shut up."

The whispered words filled the room. Ryuuen and Sakayanagi looked up from checking their phones, to see the teary and hateful face of Ichinose.

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!"

"Oh dear, I think you broke her, Ayanokouji-kun." Sakayanagi wasn't at all threatened by Ichinose, more enamoured by the situation. Ryuuen was enjoying it just as much.

"You're a terrible person, Ayanokouji. Disgusting and horrible, with no sense of morals. I knew it when we met, but I gave you the benefit of the doubt, but now I see. You really are awful. There's only one person I've ever hated before, but guess what?" She gave me a shaking grin. "You just made the list. To think there is someone so depraved as to use a secret in such a horrible way. To make me suffer for my mistakes, to threaten someone else for my mistakes."

"You done yet Honami?" Ryuuen interjected, but Ichinose ignored him.

"I hate you, Ayanokouji. I never thought I'd feel this way, but congratulations. You made me hate another human. No, not a human, because no person could be as cruel as you."

Plenty of people in history, in this school even, had done much worse than what I did today. But Ichinose couldn't think about that now, too focused on my actions. To her, in this moment, I was the worst person she had met.

"Think what you want. I've always thought that love and caring were a dangerous disadvantage, Ichinose. Thank you for the final

proof."

"This school is a competition, a game. And I was just trying to win, without sacrificing my morals, you bastard."

"I know. And this is just losing."

"You'll regret this, Ayanokouji. I made you a promise, remember? I intend to keep it."

I shrugged and turned away from her. Ichinose had filled her use, and now I was done. So was Class A. "Probably not." She could offer no threat in this state or during this exam. The risk for Chihiro was too high.

The sound of a door opening and closing came from behind me, signalling that Ichinose had left. The moment she did, Ryuuen fell into hysterics.

"You actually did it! The madman! You're fucking insane you made Honami mad! I didn't think that was possible, but you actually did it kukukuku!"

"Impressive as expected fufufu. Class A is certain to lose now."

"Play your cards right and you can get closer to Class A again. Not that it really means anything."

The difference between Class A and Class B was 70 points right now. Even, in the best-case scenario Sakayanagi came first and Amikura came last, it still wouldn't be enough to reclaim the gap. But at this stage in our school life, that didn't matter at all. The 20-point gap remaining would be practically negligible. Saving up private points was much more crucial than fighting for 20 Class Points in the first year.

"Fufuf I suppose not. Well, this was an enlightening meeting, but I still fail to understand your actions."

"I have no particular grudge against Class A, but Ichinose needed to be put into place. Besides, they need to learn how to live without my help."

"Very true. But this is a significant advantage to the White Team." Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes at me. "What do you really intend?" It was understandable for her to be suspicious. I could have planned that all with Ichinose beforehand.

"Oh right." I quickly sent a message to the two of them. "That's Class D's participation table. You can have both of them. Really, I'm still confident in the Red Team winning, this just means it takes a bit more effort. And honestly, I'd rather know what cards you have. If you already know anything, then there's nothing unexpected to happen."

It was logical, but in a stupid sense. If I knew that they held every single advantage, I had nothing to be afraid of except the impending loss.

The most interesting thing though came from Ryuuen. As he looked over the table, there was a slight flutter in his expression. Could it be surprise at our lineup? Possible, but it was reasonable, so there was nothing to be shocked about. No, there was another explanation...

"Someone already leaked our table to you, didn't they Ryuuen?"

"Kukuku you figured that one out fast. Yeah, I already had it, although I bet this is the actual one, right?"

"Yes, the one you got won't be used."

This could be a bait, I could tell his brain was processing the idea, but in the end, he would logically conclude that mine was the correct one. After all, there was no one in Class D who could outthink me and make theirs the one to use.

"Oh, and dragon-boy didn't even tell his own teammate. I'm truly hurt fufufu," Sakayanagi laughed.

"I still don't get it. Why're you giving me this. Seems kinda sus to me, monster." Ryuuen was still unsure about the participation table.

"Because Sakayanagi can't target Class D completely. If she wants to reach Class A, then I can't come last. And that's enough of a safety net for the Red Team."

It would be close, but the first years shouldn't sabotage the Red Team completely. It was a risky game, but that made it all the more fun.

"Ah, fuck it, whatever. You want to lose, be my guest. I'll crush your shit class into the ground."

"You do that."

My main advantage of giving away the participation table was for a different reason though. Both Horikita and Hirata would suspect the other had done it. The table I used incorporated both of their ideas, and either side could blame the other. This would hopefully escalate their fight even further into complete distrust.

They would also be threatened by the promise I made. In the real participation table, I was running against Kouenji. My promise of aid to whoever did that would also be a weapon of fear into the hearts of the two idiot leaders.

At worst this exam would net 100 points loss, although I was aiming to break even with second place.

"Well, I thank you for such a generous gift, Ayanokouji-kun. I will accept it as payment for the favour of calling everyone here for you."

"Hey, don't be expecting anything for this, right? You got my favour by taking your table already." Ryuuen had a sharp understanding of what I wanted them to do: sabotage my class without the blame falling on me.

Sakayanagi, leaning on her cane, pushed herself up from the couch she had been sitting on. "Fufufu well it seems I'll have to make some changes to Class B's participation table. This has been... enlightening. Thank you for the show, Ayanokouji-kun."

She walked slowly to the door and left the room. Surprisingly, Kamuro hadn't been with her, and although I had asked to meet alone, I had expected her to bring her pet along.

"You take the fun out of everything, don't you?"

I turned to Ryuuen, who was now completely serious. The laughter completely gone from his expression.

"What do you mean?"

The man sighed, and walked towards me, trying to stare me down. He was certainly one of the most intimidating students in this school when he wanted to be. I had no illusions as to his strength, or his position as leader of Class C.

"I had all these grand plans and schemes ready, and then you throw away all your advantages. Don't make things too easy."

"I'm sorry for helping you win."

"Kukuku of course I want to win. But it's better if it's fun. Being handed victories leaves a sour taste."

That was an understandable feeling. For someone to give you the victory of a situation out of their own magnanimousness, even if you were going to win yourself, it takes away the joy in the situation, any pleasure of earning the victory gone.

"Do you really think that Class D will lose just because of that?" I was genuinely interested in what he thought.

"I'm sure you've still got some tricks up your sleeve. You're lucky the loli wants to target Ichinose. I guess your class gets a break for now." I didn't believe it, although the logic was certainly sound.

"Good luck Ryuuen. I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do."

"Maybe I'll join up with Nagumo. Clearly, he needs better help," he called to my retreating form, but I ignored it. It was far too soon for more classes to start working with Nagumo. I still had plans to finish before our proper confrontation. Hopefully Sotomura could finish his work before things became too dicey.

Now all I had to wonder was who the mysterious traitor in Class D was.

Authors Notes:

Disclaimer: Salt and Vinegar aren't my favourite flavour. Doritos all the way.

Did i make Ichinose too emotional here? Is hatred something she would feel? She's always been very self-deprecating, and the other

person she's hated here is herself, but I don't think there's ever been such a direct attack in the novels. Even with the bribery in the class vote for Nagumo to date her, it was more self-hatred for being too weak. This is a new Ichinose.

I did say many times she wasn't going to have a good time in this fic.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 6 - Festival Part 1

Finally, the day of the sports festival had arrived.

To start the day off, all the students gathered together for the opening ceremony, led by Fujimaki of 3-A, before splitting off into our two teams, Red and White, and eventually our individual classes.

The school had spared no efforts in setting up the festival. Both teams had a tent, along with individual ones for each class, separated on either side of the track. A medical tent had been set up, complete with air conditioning.

All across the track I could see adults setting up. Not only were hurdles and other such requirements being placed on the ground, but cameras and all manner of recording devices were being laid out, ensuring a complete coverage of every event. There would be no easy way to cheat without the school finding out.

But for now, my class was dealing with a different issue.

"What the hell is this?!"

Chabashira had given out the program for today, which included the real participation table. As expected, it wasn't what people had been expecting.

"That's the participation table the class submitted," Chabashira replied, bored.

"Sensei, this isn't what we agreed on. I thought we could only decide with a class concensus?" Hirata questioned. He was acting calm, but it was clearly a thin façade. Hirata was very mad about this turn of events.

"I was told the whole class had agreed to it, so I submitted it. Besides, there's nothing you can do about it now. This table has been finalised and that's what you're using today." Chabashira clearly had no intention to sugar-coat the situation. The class had to get their head around the change in the situation, and quickly.

Horikita narrowed her eyes. "Could you at least tell us who it was that submitted it, Chabashira-sensei?"

"No. The person in question requested their identity to be protected."

I felt a small amount of relief. I hadn't expected Chabashira to give me away, but it was always a possibility.

Horikita sighed but understood that there was no sense asking any more of Chabashira. Taking a copy, she began to look it over closely, before recognising the biggest change.

"This turned out pretty well for you, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll ask you honestly: did you submit the altered participation table?"

"No." It was true. Theirs had been the altered one. Mine was the original table submitted, so in a sense, I wasn't lying. "But I'm pretty happy with this turn of events."

Horikita and Hirata both gave me a searching look, before giving up on being able to tell if I was lying.

"I guess there's nothing we can do. Whoever submitted this definitely thought it through at least. It's not a complete attempt at sabotaging our winning chances, just a moderate one," Horikita determined, giving Hirata a suspicious glare.

"I wasn't the one to submit this table, Horikita-san. But you're right, there's nothing we can do. For now, it shouldn't matter for our races. We'll have to talk to Class A about the team events."

That was the biggest issue with the changed participation table. For our individual events there was no problem, but when we were grouped with Class A for events, certain strategies would go out the window since different people were involved.

Before any more discussion could be held, the school began calling for the students for the first 100m sprint. There were a lot of events to get through in one day, and there was no time to waste. If we didn't turn up, we would be disqualified.

"Good luck sorting out the participation table. I'm curious as to who made the change."

Neither Hirata nor Horikita took note of my words, too busy arguing over who could have made the change, and whether the situation was any better or worse than before.

I walked down to the starting position, to find most of my competitors already there.

The boys in the first year were split into ten groups, with eight boys in each one, two from each class.

Kouenji was already here, doing some warm-up stretches off to the side. Clearly, he was taking this very seriously. With the level of effort, I suspected we would be putting in, not stretching could potentially cause a lot of harm.

Most surprising, was that Ryuuen and Sakayanagi seemed to have believed me, or at least partially. For this event at least, they had sent some of their most unfit and unathletic students to run. Whether that was indicative of the entire festival I couldn't be sure, but at least for this event they had taken a risk and trusted my participation table.

However, they weren't the ones I was focusing on right now. Currently, Kouenji and I were getting shocked looks from the Class A representatives, Kanzaki and Shibata.

After getting the participation table from Ichinose, I made a few modifications to my own, targeting their fastest runners. Clearly, Amikura and Kanzaki had been in charge of the planning and were prepared to make sacrifices in order to claim big points. Winning first and second place in a race netted 27 points, which canceled out any losses. Their plan was to brute force some races, and abandon others and hopefully get a positive result.

That was also what Horikita had been planning before Hirata got in the way of that strategy.

"Ayanokouji... what are you doing here?"

Due to that strategy, Class A and D had cooperated to create participation tables that wouldn't interrupt with each other's strategy. The only flaw in that plan was a situation like this one – where Class A lost with their best hope.

I shrugged in response to Kanzaki's question. "Our participation table was changed by someone, so Kouenji and I are in this race."

"It's rather unfortunate for you peasants, but you are being granted the chance to witness true perfection." Kouenji had finished his stretches and moved over to join us.

"You understand we were supposed to win this race? That was the plan, wasn't it?" Shibata was slowly catching on to the problem here.

"That's your problem. I don't think you've really got a chance." It was a cold response, but I had no interest in helping them get over their concerns. This was their plan, and they had known about the problem in it but chosen to go ahead anyway.

The starter came over and called everyone into place. This was the first race of the day, and momentum could swing massively just from this one. Class A had been expecting a win, and Class D had been expecting to lose. The motivation from seeing a stunning victory would provide an energy boost to the rest of Class D.

I hunched over at the starting line next to Kouenji, focusing on the 100m stretch in front of me.

"Do your best Masterpiece. This time, I shall prove my true perfection."

Kouenji's voice floated into my ears, but I wasn't focused on him. I had run this distance multiple times for years. This wasn't anything new. I let the sounds of the world fade away, ignoring the cheering from the sidelines. The only thing left in my mind was the race.

The starter pistol fired, and I took off. It had been months since I

had to run this fast. 100m was a short distance. The ground flew under me, the world a blur to my side. The only thing I could see was the finish line, and Kouenji pushing himself right beside me.

The wind was rushing through my ears, the crowd completely silent. The world fell away, and all that remained was the race. Kouenji or I, who would win.

The finish line was closing, the distance between us shrinking. It was close, it was a narrow gap, growing smaller by the second and then the finish line arrived, and we crossed it in a blur, stumbling as we tried to slow down.

I looked back to see the rest of our competitors finishing not long after, but the gap between us and the rest was by far the largest. The competition between classes wasn't even close. But there was only one competition I was interested in though.

Surprisingly, there was no announcement of victory, and I looked around to see the judges huddled around a monitor connected to the camera. Apparently, our race had been close enough to require a video confirmation, down to the millisecond.

"You certainly put up a challenge, Ayanokouji-boy. As I expected, it was a truly impressive race, worthy of our talents."

"I'm honestly surprised you ran so quickly."

Kouenji was certainly physically impressive, much more than anyone else in the school, but I didn't think the race would have been close enough to require a video referee. But even more surprising-

"By the smallest of margins, the winner is Kouenji Rokusuke of Class 1-D!"

The smirk on his face grew into one of true satisfaction. Kouenji had beaten me, no matter how small the margin.

"Ha! I truly am the perfect existence! To think I truly can defeat you at something."

There were plenty of excuses I could come up with. Since coming to this school, I hadn't been training like I usually did, while Kouenji kept up with his. I was busy winning class exams, distracted by possibilities. But in the end, it didn't matter. Kouenji had beaten me, by the slimmest of margins.

He had the better start, that was true. When he pushed off from the starting block, Kouenji had used more force than I could, and that gave him a slight lead. I had closed it almost completely in that 100m, but in the end, it wasn't quite enough.

In a straight 100m sprint, with no external factors, Kouenji was faster, at least in this instance. The result was so close that if done again, you couldn't be certain of the result.

I shook my head out of the spiralling denial. It was something I

hadn't experienced before, and so my disbelief was understandable, but pointless. The fact remained that Kouenji had beaten me in this race, and so I would have to work harder to make sure it didn't happen again.

"You two... are really fast."

Kanzaki and Shibata had come up to us, panting from exhaustion. It wasn't a long race, but apparently, they'd put in all their effort, and managed to come third and fourth. Almost anyone could have predicted this result.

Kouenji and I weren't as tired, but even still I felt a slight bit of exhaustion. That had taken a lot of effort to run, and I would have to do it again a few more times.

But it was necessary to secure his cooperation.

"Now you are witness to true perfection. Ha! I shall grace you with my presence for our next race."

And with those parting words Kouenji walked off. But his words drew out a worried look in the faces of Kanzaki and Shibata. After all, they were some of Class A's best performers, and had been hoping to secure the most points. If they were destined to remain at best third and fourth, Class A would certainly struggle.

"Whoever changed your participation table is certainly causing problems," Kanzaki noted.

"It's making life interesting, that's for sure."

"We need to talk to your classes leaders about this. If this continues, I'm not sure how well we'll fair."

"Feel free, but there's nothing you can do about it at this point," I reminded them, before walking off.

Finally, I noticed the crowd of people cheering. Our class had just achieved the best possible result in that race, and morale was up. We were off to a good start.

The next event I was participating in was the hurdles. The school had organised the events in an odd way. For the 100m sprint, the first-year boys went first, all the way until the third-year girls last. Then, for the next event the order was reversed, starting with third-year girls and ending with the first-year boys.

Having nothing to do, I didn't return to the class tent, instead heading over to the nearby trees, where I'd set up my hammock. It was risky putting it here in the open, but by now everyone knew to leave my hammock alone. After all, the biggest troublemakers were gone now, and none of the other troublesome individuals were willing to risk getting on my bad side anymore.

Lying down, it was possible to watch just from over the lip of the hammock and watch as people raced.

While it wasn't a perfect representation, it was possible to get a

decent understanding of how the day would play out just from watching the races.

Slowly, I began to notice the patterns through the 10 boys and 10 girls races. It was odd, and very slight, but knowing two of the participation tables made it clear what the plan for the White Team was.

Ryuuen and Sakayanagi hadn't completely trusted my word, or the participation tables given to them. But they had used them to some extent, taking a few risks.

Races where I and Kouenji were, along with the supposed best performing students of Class A and D, they hadn't even attempted to challenge our results, throwing their worst pawns in them. It was the midrange races that were the most interesting. Races where, according to the participation tables, there were somewhat capable runners on my side, they had taken the risk and put up better runners, but also people who would be beaten by our best.

If we had lied, then that would have been a troublesome loss, not crushing enough to destroy their chances, but it would make life difficult.

Sakayanagi and Ryuuen seemed to have found the perfect middle ground between trust and a complete distrust of whatever I told them.

Just as I had expected.

By giving away my participation table, I made it incredibly suspect, but the situation also made it seem legitimate. There were reasons for both believing and disbelieving what I and Ichinose gave them, and it was that problem that hampered their ability.

If left to chance, there was every possibility that the two of them could create participation tables that beat us in every aspect, but now that they knew what they could potentially be facing, every choice had to be made keeping that in mind.

Was it a trap? Was I being honest? From that moment there was no way for them to truly commit to one strategy. They too, had found a middle ground, but unless they pulled back very strongly in the recommended participants events, they would probably lose, dragging the white team down even further.

It was the recommended events that were the most dangerous to Class D.

But in spite of all that, there were two oddities.

The first was Horikita.

Class D and Class A combined had a number of athletic students, who could hope to beat almost everyone else in the grade. All of them had been left the scraps of athletic talent, except for Horikita. In her race, Class B and C had thrown some of their best runners.

As I watched, Horikita was struggling to pull forward, and eventually fell down into third place as she crossed the finish line. It would be a disappointing finish for the girl, but I was more interested in Ryuuen and Sakayanagi's cooperation to target her specifically.

All of this was conjecture though. Until more events happened, it was only speculation based on a small sample. Whether this trend would continue, and I suspected it would, would be revealed in the 200m sprint and hurdles.

The other thing, and it was something I didn't believe was real or was worried about, was the listlessness of Class C. When they ran, most of them put their best effort in, but there were plenty who didn't seem to care. Their class wasn't even paying attention, but sitting around talking, and chatting to people from other classes. It was like they had no sense of unity or coordination, no one to motivate them now that Ryuuen had lost some of his danger.

Was he going to leave things this way? From what I understood, Ryuuen knew what was going on. There was no way he was actually taken by Amikura, right? I couldn't see him losing his grip over the class for this. If he did, then I had severely overestimated him.

The races began for the second years, but I had no interest in focusing on them. There was a benefit to paying some attention, but I didn't need to understand the intricacies of the grade just yet. Reading the results later would be enough, although I could probably predict the results.

I was surprised at one thing. The first person to come over and disturb me wasn't from my class. I had been expecting Hirata or Horikita, or even Sudou.

Instead, it was Amikura.

"Well, to think you lost! To be honest I hadn't expected it."

"To think you came sixth."

"Hehe, you don't need to mock me, I never had a chance."

Amikura tried to lean over my hammock and leer at my face with a horrifying grin but ended up pouting when I didn't react.

"You're no fun," she complained.

"Get to the point. I need to rest for the next race." It would take a lot of effort to beat Kouenji, and I had no intention of wasting it on a girl like this.

"Ah, fine, whatever. I'm sure you get what's going on, right?"

I sighed. As expected of one of the Class A leaders, Amikura had also seen through the strange results and figured out the situation.

"Not only did someone change the Class D table, the Class A one was also leaked."

Amikura jumped back pointing a finger at me, grin plastered to her face.

"Got it in one! Though I'm impressed you can tell that just from watching the races."

"I don't see why you're so relaxed about it." Relaxed probably wasn't the right word, but there was nothing in Amikura that showed any trace of worry.

"Well, that's because I had a look at your new table. The Red Team isn't in too much trouble if your class just pulls their weight. Besides," and she gave a sly grin, "fourth place is already determined, no matter any betrayal."

"Oh?" I was curious as to what she thought. While fourth place was almost guaranteed already, I was confident it wasn't what Amikura was thinking.

"Nee, don't play dumb. You're so much more fun usually! What happened, you get rejected by a girl?"

I sighed. "Fine. You're not worried because whoever leaked your table, Sakayanagi clearly doesn't completely believe it. And Class C isn't a worry because you've got Ryuuen under control. Is that correct?"

"Yep! 100% right! I've got everything handled, so don't get your panties in a twist. You just need to do your best, and a little job for me, and everything'll be fine."

Amikura was certainly confident in her strategies. And she wanted me to do a job for her?

"Care to explain?" I asked for some clarification.

"Just keep winning your races, and make sure Kouenji competes. As long as you keep it up, the Red Team should be in the clear. I also want you to find out who changed the Class D participation table. Justice will be served," she elaborated.

"You should probably know, I'm quite happy with the changes. I certainly won't be outing the person who made them." As a matter of fact, I still had no idea who gave Ryuuen the participation table, not that I had investigated much. I was sure the answer would come up sooner or later in the day.

"Hmm, I guess I can understand that." Amikura rested her head on her arm, pondering the situation. "You get that we can't just leave it though, right? Class A is kinda fucked over, even if the Red Team wins."

"You're certainly in a tough position," I agreed. "I'm surprised you recognised that someone leaked the participation table already though. There's no conclusive proof." It was certainly impressive that from watching 20 races Amikura had already come to this conclusion.

"Eh, to be honest it was just a hunch, so I came to you for clarification! Ha! I tricked you!" The childish attitude fell away after a moment though. "In actuality, it was hard to tell. Class D changing their participation table made it confusing, but it was clear that Sakayanagi-san knew what she was doing ahead of time. No, there's definitely been a leak. And I suspect, they were working with your class."

"That's a big leap in logic." Amikura was certainly impressive when it came to underhanded thinking, so it made sense that she had figured that out as well. I was a little concerned, in fact. It was a bit too early for her to be realising that.

"No, I think it's pretty obvious. The table was changed in a way to target Class A as well, with you and Kouenji-kun running against Kanzaki-kun and Shibata-kun. But that was meant to distract us. Looking back, it's clear that people from all three classes are working together."

"You are Class A," I reasoned. "It's to be expected that you get targeted."

Amikura frowned. "That's true, but I thought we'd be able to get along at least for now. Class A is in a really tough spot. I'm counting on you to help us out in the team events."

"You can be sure that we'll win them," I assured the girl. I felt like testing her a little, so I prodded a different situation. "Are you really sure that Ryuuen is out of the fight?"

To her credit, Amikura didn't instantly assure me that she had been successful. On the contrary, she threw a look over to the Class C tent, with a slight worry on her face.

"I've been wondering the same thing. I thought I'd done a good job neutering the bastard, but his class is working a bit too well even without him."

"Sakayanagi is the one leading them both right now though," I argued back, for the sake of argument.

"Yeah I know, but... there's something off. Ah, manybe I'm just nuts. His class is still mostly useless. Like, look at them! They're actually having a fight!"

Indeed, in the time that we'd been talking, a small brawl had broken out between Ibuki and Ishizaki. I suppose brawl wasn't the word to describe such a one-sided fight, but no one, not even Ryuuen was moving to stop them.

"It's very strange. Maybe you really did stop him." I continued to play the devil's advocate.

"Huh. I guess I did. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but that fucker doesn't seem the type to die." I sighed internally. It seemed Amikura wasn't capable of seeing the bigger picture or considering the

dangers of her actions. It was a good plan, but there was a glaring weakness I was sure Ryuuen could exploit if he wanted.

"The results speak for themselves. If there's a danger from the White Team, it will come from Sakayanagi," I warned. Amikura was smart, and her attempt to stop Ryuuen was certainly to be commended, but she had a bit of a blind spot when it came to Class B at the moment.

"Hmm, maybe I tried to date the wrong person. But I reckon Kamurao-san would beat the shit out of me if I tried."

"She's certainly protective. Do you have any idea why she follows Sakayanagi around?" I tried to poke around for any information I may have missed.

"Nah, I got nothing. I tried to ask, but I just got a creepy laugh back." Amikura sighed deeply. She had made some impressive plans, but all of them had gone out of the window the moment Class D's participation table changed and hers was leaked.

"Can you think of any reason why someone would betray your class?" I prodded.

"Look, I've been trying, but I don't know. Points are worthless, we get heaps every month. Our class is really close, we don't have secrets." That was a lie, and for more reasons than one. The girl in front of me was keeping more secrets than anyone else in Class A.

"Do you really think you can turn this around?"

"We'll have to wait and see, I guess. But I'm not done yet! It'll take more than this bullshit to stop Mako, the fearsome dragon tamer!" She exclaimed. Clearly, a self a pointed title.

"Why are you talking to me anyway? I could very well be the traitor from Class D."

A sly smirk grew on the face of the little demon. "Oh, I never said I trust you. You're just useful to talk to. In fact, you're the highest on my list of suspects." As expected of this girl.

"Be careful Amikura. Things aren't always as they seem. Right now, I'm your best chance to survive."

A smirk. "As if I'd risk trusting you. But thanks for the advice. Anyway, I'm sure I can salvage this somehow. Class C is done, all I have to do is beat Sakayanagi on the field." She laughed at the idea of running a race against a cripple.

"Don't worry, I'll participate. But right now, Amikura, I'm the only friend you have." I reached out a hand to her. "Trust me, and I'll save you from a complete defeat."

It wasn't a genuine offer. If she took me up on it, I would give up any hope for her being able to fight alone. This was her chance to prove she could stand with the other leaders, and if she took an offered out, any respect I had for her, for trying to salvage a

damaged class and clawing her way to the top, for betraying her class to gain her position, would be gone.

Throughout this conversation as I had been pressing harder and harder with my questions, the previously calm and unworried girl had become more and more concerned, increasingly stressed. The more she thought about the situation, the worse it got.

"No. I can fight for myself, and I don't need my biggest suspect's help. Like you said, the day's just begun, and we've only had one event. I'm not giving up this early."

With that, Amikura turned around and left me to watch the third years begin their races from my hammock. As I watched, the girl walked back to her tent, and began to exchange words with Ichinose and Kanzaki.

In the end, I had respect for her. She tried her best, but when it came down to the line, Amikura just wasn't good enough.

Ryuuen was going to eat her alive.

Once the races were over, the school announced the current standings, based on the 100m spring.

Red Team: 2025, White Team: 1853

Authors Notes:

So, the biggest thing in this chapter: Kouenji beating Ayanokouji. I spent a long time debating this, but in this fic i do want them to be a bit competetive. In canon, i don't think Kouenji would win, but even so it's possible then. A straight 100m sprint with no other elements, and with a very small margin i think is reasonable to assume that Ayanokouji might lose. Curious to what other people think.

Going to be very lazy with titles for this part. Chapter titles are hard enough as it is, but now I give up for the sports festival.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 7 - Festival Part 2

The 100m Hurdle Event was next, and I made my way down to the starting line. The first-year boys were the last group to go, and I was in the first group to run, along with all of the same competitors as last race.

Watching the girls, it was clear that the White Team was still doubting the participation tables somewhat, and had changed up the order of their runners, just in case we had done so as well. This resulted in slightly better results for them, but now it was clear just how this festival would play out.

My group, however, had stayed the same. Clearly Sakayanagi and Ryuuen trusted me enough to keep my group the same and hadn't bothered trying to gamble any faster runners where I said I would be. The sacrificial students were still running against Kouenji and I, along with Kanzaki and Shibata.

"I guess we're doing this again. Is there any chance you would consider letting us win?" Kanzaki half-heartedly tried.

"Ha! I wouldn't dream of sacrificing the MVP rewards for a peasant like you. To degrade myself in such a fashion would be shameful," Kouenji rejected.

"What he said," I added.

Shibata and Kanzaki looked rather frustrated, but I was sure they could guess our response. Class D got no benefit out of letting them win this race, since after all it was still a competition.

"I understand. But we won't take it easy on you," Shibata sarcastically added. He understood there was no comparison between the Class A and Class D representatives.

The starter called us to the line, and once again I was next to Kouenji. This time, I was prepared to win.

I could hear the boy next to me faintly boasting his own worth to himself but ignored that too.

The starter fired the pistol, and everyone took off, leaping over the hurdles as fast as possible.

It's a difficult thing to do, especially for someone without much practice. To jump a hurdle while running is a very different technique, and some people are simply incapable of doing it.

I pushed myself even harder than before. For the first time in my

life, today I could run for myself, because I wanted to, and I reached speeds faster than I had ever gone.

In no time at all, I crossed the finish line, having cleared all 10 hurdles, narrowly beating Kouenji.

This time, the race wasn't close enough to warrant a video confirmation, and so I took first place, with Kouenji in a close second.

Shibata and Kanzaki finished in third and fourth respectively, while three of the other four students simply walked along, pushing over the hurdles as they did so.

Obviously, they had been told that their results didn't matter at all.

"Truly an incredible race. You are the perfect opponent for the perfect existence, Ayanokouji-boy," Kouenji remarked.

"I guess we're one for one now. I'm sure we can determine a winner by the end of the day." I was confident I could pull ahead and not lose another race after this.

"Very true. Challenge me again in the 200m race, and I shall see you for the team events. As promised, you held up your end of the bargain, so I shall participate." Saying this, Kouenji once again disappeared into the crowd, leaving me behind with Shibata and Kanzaki. Luckily, he was willing to participate, and I had a good idea of why.

"I'm glad to hear that he's participating in other events. Your class leaders were worried about that," Kanzaki said.

"Was that really a topic of conversation?"

Kanzaki nodded. "Yeah, they were worried he'd back out. I can see now why they were so keen on getting him involved, so I guess we should be thankful that you helped out with that. No one else had had any luck."

I hadn't heard that at all, but apparently Horikita or Hirata had been trying to negotiate with Kouenji to gain his help. Unfortunately for them, I was the only one who held anything he valued: my participation.

"How is your class doing points wise?" I hadn't been paying close enough attention to calculate that myself.

"Hey, we should move away from the track to talk," Shibata suggested. The next group were beginning their run, so it made sense to get away from the end.

Once we moved to the side, near the Red Team tents, Kanzaki gave me another look. "You've spoken to Amikura-san, right?" At my confirmation, he continued. "It's pretty hard to work out without phones or books, but we're definitely worse off than we thought. It's really going to come down to the team events, but even then, I don't

think we can come first at this point."

Shibata seemed a little shocked to hear Kanzaki admit defeat that early, but I had to agree with him. Every advantage they had was nullified, and it was just a matter of time before the White Team came back, which they had to do sooner or later.

"Keep an eye on Amikura," I suggested. "There's something odd there with Ryuuen."

"Hey, are they really dating?" Shibata asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think either of them like each other."

"But Ryuuen—"

"Ryuuen is playing the exact same game," I interrupted Kanzaki with a warning. "And I don't think Amikura is capable of winning it."

"That girl," he muttered in frustration. "All she does is cause problems."

"No, she saved your class from collapse. You need her, but she also needs you to keep her in check," I cautioned Kanzaki. It wouldn't do for him to blame all their problems on her. She had to salvage his bad leadership in the first place. Neither of them could work alone. They required the other to balance them out, and Ichinose to round out the class relations.

"He's right, Kanzaki. We all need each other to work together. That's our classes strength."

Yes, Shibata was correct, but it was also their weakness. Every other class had backups, but even though the unity of Class A was strong, if it broke, they had no other strength to rely upon.

"I assume you're in the first group for the 200m sprint again, Ayanokouji?" The next event was the 200m sprint, and the first-year boys were going first. That didn't give us a lot of rest time, so Kanzaki and Shibata had decided to wait down near the track.

"Yeah. The school is really rushing through the events."

"You can say that again! Surely, we could have done this on multiple days," Shibata complained. Even as fit as he was, having to participate in 12 events in one day as Shibata was would wear down anyone.

"I suppose they can't dedicate too much time. We already had multiple class sessions for training. Besides, I think that understanding and managing the stamina and energy of a large group is the sort of lesson the school would try and teach us."

That wasn't wrong. The school liked to add in a valuable lesson to their tests, even though today was supposed to be a fun competition.

"Ayanokouji, did the Class D table also get leaked by a traitor?" Kanzaki suddenly asked. The last few races were over now, and we

wouldn't have long before we had to run in the 200m sprint.

"What makes you think that?" I was surprised that he managed to pick up on it so quickly.

"Well, not only was it changed, but most of the White Team are avoiding your best runners. All of them except for Horikita, who is constantly targeted by their best."

"I'm impressed you noticed. With the changes messing things up I didn't think anyone else had, but yes. I'm confident Sakayanagi has the Class D participation table." I confirmed his suspicions

"And as Amikura suspected, that person was working with the Class A traitor," he muttered, Shibata nodding along. As their best sportsman, it was understandable that he was involved with such conversations.

Suddenly, Kanzaki turned to me, fire in his eyes. "Ayanokouji, you will find the traitor in your class."

"No."

Kanzaki seemed taken aback to my refusal, much like Amikura was. "Why not? Shouldn't you halt the information flow?"

I sighed, gesturing to the race in front of us, the last of the boys hurdles. "Take a look Kanzaki. It's a symphony of chaos. Class A is being beaten down by all three classes, Class D has no idea what is happening, but most importantly, Class B and C are completely hampered. They can't trust the information, but they can't disregard it, meaning they're stuck in a limbo. Whoever gave out the information has cut off all four classes at the knees. No one can do their best." Except for Class D, but I didn't say that part out loud.

Shibata grunted unhappily. "I guess you're right. If the tables were leaked, Sakayanagi-san and Ryuuen-san aren't taking advantage of them properly, so I guess they didn't trust the leak. Still makes me mad though."

"This is a sports festival. Stop worrying about dirty scoundrels and just have a good time. Dirty tricks won't win in the end." No, today would come down to who could properly prepare their athletic students the best.

"They're calling us over. Time to go lose again," Shibata bemoaned to Kanzaki. It had only been a few minutes since our last race, but due to the organisation of the event, we were up again already.

The three of us made our way to the starting line, the same group of students lined up for our race. Clearly, we were the only ones this happened for, every other group once again having been changed around. Ryuuen and Sakayanagi had taken no chances.

"Once more we run, Ayanokouji-boy! Today is a good day to prove my perfection. Training against such a perfect being, we truly

are blessed."

"Honestly, I'm enjoying this." To have a true competitor was something I'd been missing. For years, I had only been competing against myself, against my own time. Now I had an actual person to race, it made the effort put in all the more worth it.

I lined up next to Kouenji, and when the starter fired the starting pistol we took off. This feeling of running, of the wind bluring past my face, every time it felt like freedom. To run for me, to compete for myself.

Kouenji had another perfect start and was a slight bit in front of me, but slowly I was closing the distance, getting closer and closer until finally I snuck past. Pushing my legs harder than before I powered onwards, arms thrusting at my side, pulling away from Kouenji before crossing the finish line a few tenths of a second before him.

As I had suspected from the 100m sprint, Kouenji started running with more power than I did, but it didn't take me long to catch him. I simply hadn't had enough time then, but in this longer race it was easy enough to pass and overtake him, despite the insignificant differences in our position. To an outside observer, we would have seemed almost equally matched, and so we were, but to us, there was a noticeable difference in our highest speed.

"Ah, once again it's my loss. But to match a creation such as you, shows that to true humans I truly am perfection." Kouenji, despite losing twice now, had reframed his mind to exclude me from his definition of competition, and hence remained the perfect existence. Since I wasn't raised as an ordinary human, or even like him, I wasn't able to take the title from him in his mind. I shrugged. If that kept him competing and in a good mood, I didn't mind.

I didn't have a chance to respond to him, Kouenji pulling his disappearing act again and returning to wherever it was that he was relaxing in between events.

This time though, after finishing our race, Kanzaki and Shibata didn't wait around to talk, deciding to head back to their tent and confer with their leaders.

Hopefully Kanzaki took my advice on board. It would make the inevitable confrontation so much more satisfying.

I returned to where my hammock was to take a short breather. Kouenji certainly wasn't a pushover in our races together, and with the obstacle course up next, I couldn't slack off.

It wasn't long before my next guest came to greet me. Hirata had just finished his race, coming in first place this time, narrowly beating out Hamaguchi.

"Impressive run," I commented.

"Thanks. You and Kouenji have certainly been going all out." I suppose it was clear at this point there was some rivalry between us to any observers.

"He's fast. I'm faster," I put it simply. "He's agreed to participate in the other events though."

"That's a relief," Hirata replied, although his expression was anything but relieved. "Things are tough for the Red Team right now. It's good to have you and Kouenji keeping up morale."

Not as many of my classmates had managed to win their races or do as well as expected. Along with that, we were also interfering with our teammates, so many people would have been confused or off-put by this turn of events.

"I asked everyone to leave you alone if you didn't come back to the tent. I suspected you probably didn't care about people cheering for you," Hirata continued.

"You guessed right. I'm much happier relaxing here." There was a small breeze brushing across the track, and my hammock was swinging slightly in it.

"I'll be blunt, Ayanokouji. Did you change the participation table and leak it to the White Team?" There was a steel in Hirata's voice that showed he wasn't going to back down.

"So, you think it was leaked too?" I avoided the question.

"I'm not certain, but there's definitely some suspicious happenings." Both of us looked at the track to watch as Horikita was once again overwhelmed by the best runners in Class C. "Every race the two classes alternate which runners are against her. Horikita-san has barely been able to get any decent results. She's been completely shut down by our opponents."

I thought that was a rather cruel thing for Hirata to say, considering the circumstances.

"You think someone was targeting Horikita?"

"That's exactly what I think. I'm just surprised that Ryuuen-kun and Sakayanagi-san trusted the traitor." Hirata seemed genuinely shocked at the turn of events, and even a little bit scared. Fists clenched, he declared, "This is exactly what I was hoping to avoid."

"It's certainly not pretty." Even from here I could see the frustrated look on Horikita's face. For her this was an embarrassment, her failing to live up to her claims. "But can you really do anything about it?"

"There's always something you can do. I won't tolerate any form of bullying or harassment. If there's someone endangering the class, I'll deal with it." Hirata wasn't budging on this point.

"Be careful Hirata," I warned.

He looked down at me from his standing position beside my

hammock. "Of what?"

"You really don't understand?" I sighed. "Things won't go the way you think. Ryuuen and Sakayanagi aren't finished yet. They won't let this opportunity go to waste. Right now, we're being lulled into a false sense of security before they strike."

"Then help me Ayanokouji! Help me stop them before anyone else is in danger. Horikita-san is already struggling, and I don't want that to happen to anyone else."

Finally, I looked at him, dead in the eye. "Hirata, at this point it's beyond your control."

"You say that as if you know the future."

"No, I'm pretty sure I've got it all figured out now. Who the traitor is in Class A, who the traitor is in Class D and who changed the participation table, I'm confident I'm right. All that's left is to see what the White Team does with their advantage. That's where the fun will be today." It had clicked in my head not long ago, and suddenly everything became clear.

His face was virtually unreadable, but it was his clenched fists and tense shoulders that spoke volumes. If I was anyone else, having him lean over me in a hammock would have been terrifying.

"You know everything?"

"I'm pretty sure I do. It was a fun game, but it's over now."

"Ayanokouji. If you know who the traitors are, tell me. We need to punish them."

I tilted my head slightly at him. "You already know, though. Deep down, you know who betrayed the class, who caused the two of us problems, right? But no, I won't join in on your crusade. It's much more fun to watch for the conclusion."

I turned back to the races to watch as Kikyou managed to come first in her 200m run.

"Fine. Watch from the sidelines, Ayanokouji. I'll make sure that any problems in our class are solved." I could feel the frustration and anger with me in his voice. In his mind, I was allowing someone to suffer and refusing to prevent it. He wanted nothing more than for the perpetrator of the situation to be punished.

"Hirata. Is a leaf's only purpose to fall?" I asked.

"And what the hell does that mean?" Hirata was fed up with my attitude and acting in any civil manner was almost impossible now.

"Sure, it's inevitable that it will. But until that point, who knows how useful it is? So even if it will eventually break away, that doesn't justify pruning it."

"That still doesn't make any sense. Stop speaking in riddles and be straightforward." But I could tell from the slight tremble he knew what I meant.

"Ike and Yamauchi were problematic; you can't deny that. But they could still have had some value in the future. I gave up on that when I got rid of them." This was the first time I had directly spoken to Hirata one on one about that situation. More and more, I was egging him into action.

"Are you saying you made a mistake then? That you feel bad?!" Hirata almost yelled that last part, enraged that I would have such a nonchalant guilt.

"Not at all. It was the best choice, but it wasn't the only one. Just because a situation is inevitable, doesn't mean hastening it is the right choice." I could only hope that Hirata understood my advice.

"Ayanokouji, you're useful to the class, that's something I can't deny. But endanger any more of our classmates, and I don't care about how useful you are. Like I said to Horikita, I'll sacrifice our chances at reaching Class A to save them, even if it means going against you." I had to admire that resolve.

"You do that." I closed my eyes and listened to the crowd, the cheering and ignored the boy trying a terrible interrogation of me. Finally, after a long while, I heard his footsteps as he walked away from my hammock and returned to the team tent.

I let myself swing in the wind for a while, ignoring the footsteps of an approaching person. I wasn't some god who answered questions, or helped those in need. Right now, nothing interesting was happening so I wanted to be left alone.

Poke.

Poke.

Poke.

I cracked an eye open to see Kikyou sanding over me, poking my chest over and over until I acknowledged her presence.

"What?"

"Ne, that's no way to greet someone! Try again."

"Congratulations on winning you race."

"Ah, thanks! Ehe, it wasn't easy, but I tried my best. You and Kouenji have really been running quickly though! It's incredible." Kikyou scratched her head in embarrassment. "I think you two and Sudou are the only reason our class hasn't given up yet. Things are really bad over in the tent."

"I'm sure your victories have been keeping moral up. You've won two of your races, right?"

"Aha, I suppose. Things aren't terrible, but everyone's a bit confused, not to mention disheartened by our teammates losing all the time." She gave me a curious look. "Did you put me in easy races on purpose?"

"I might have given you some weaker opponents from Class A.

Are you complaining?"

"Nah, not at all. But are you trying to win? It was you who gave Ryuuen-kun and Sakayanagi-san the participation tables, right?" Kikyou was understandably confused by my actions.

"I'm more curious as to how Class A handles things. At this rate, the Red Team has a very good chance to win, and we're doing better than Class A, so at worst we'll lose 50 points. I'm perfectly happy to pay that," I explained. Ideally, we lose nothing, but 50 points was an acceptable loss in this situation.

"I mean, you cost us more than that when you got rid of Ike and Yamauchi, so I guess it's not a problem," she conceded dubiously.

"So, what do you want?" I questioned. We had gotten off topic.

"Ah right! So, a couple of questions. One, do you care what group you're in for the cavalry fight? We're trying to reform them with the new participation table." That was one of the biggest problems. Most of the previous teams would be the same, but a few would have to be reformed to include my changes.

I tilted my head slightly in confusion. "Isn't everyone participating in the cavalry? What's the problem?"

"Two of the boys are injured from running, and one is claiming they're too tired to participate after all the running. We're grouping them into their own unit, so now we have to restructure a bit." It was actually beneficial in this situation to be down two students. We didn't need to worry about unnecessary problems.

"I don't have any real requirements, although I'd prefer to be the leader for my unit."

Kikyou nodded at my request. "Right, and you should be able to get away with that after your performance so far. Next, is there anything else you need help with today?"

"No, it's fine. So far, everything is within my expectations. Some advice though, stay away from Class C. They're definitely plotting something."

"Hm? So Ryuuen is faking it then. I wasn't sure." I wasn't surprised that Kikyou had picked up on this being an act. The both of them were very far out of their usual character.

"No, both of them are faking it, thinking they've out-thunk the other. It's getting stupid, but Amikura is probably going to lose."

"Got it. I'll keep away from Class C as much as I can," Kikyou nodded. "There is one other problem though."

"Oh?" I thought I had taken everything into account, but I guess I had missed something. That's why I had Kikyou after all.

She pointed a finger at me. "If you keep winning, you're gonna get the attention of girls. Although it might be too late for that."

I tilted my head slightly. "I thought I was generally disliked in

class?"

Kikyou sighed. "It doesn't matter. Yeah, you come off as a dick, but it's all about status. Girls'll overlook anything if they get to date the fastest runner in the school."

"Hmm, I guess that is a problem. I can just ignore them all, right?"

"Yeah, that's probably the best strategy," she nodded. "But you should probably be prepared at least. I'll make sure to talk down anyone who asks me about you."

"Why would you do that?" I questioned.

"Well, I'm not going to let you date just anyone. I've got dibs," she muttered at the end.

"What was that?" I didn't quite hear her last words

"What?"

"Never mind. It's the obstacle course next right? How is Horikita doing?" Kikyou's face soured at the mention of her problem.

"She's having a bad time, but as expected, she won't give up. Honestly, I want to thank the white team. I've never seen her so mad!" There was a gleeful look on Kikyou's face that I did my best to ignore. This wasn't the time or place to be encouraging her anger.

"Tell them I'm fine with the cavalry if I'm the rider. I need to warm up for the obstacle course."

"Right. Good luck, Kiyotaka-kun! I'll be cheering for you!" Kikyou gave a brilliant smile accompanied with a small jump and punched the air, the picture of kindhearted support, before skipping away back towards the tent.

The obstacle course, huh? That would certainly be an interesting race against Kouenji.

Authors Notes:

I didn't go to bet last night i was reading light novel series so i'm super fucking tired. No big authors notes.

I wrote the next chapter today so when i wake up i get to find out if its actually coherent or if the words go backwards wrong.

I don't know sports so take my justifications however you want

As always hope you enjoyed

Arc 6 Chapter 8 - Festival Part 3

There were only three events left until lunch. The school had broken up the day so that most of the individual events were in the morning and the recommended in the afternoon. From now until lunch, the first years would participate in the obstacle course, the three-legged race and the cavalry battle.

I went and lined up for the obstacle course. It was certainly different to any other event that I had participated in so far. A sprint, balance beams, crawling under a net and jumping in a sack to round it out. Certainly, a varied combination, but I wasn't worried about my winning chances.

I couldn't be sure Kouenji's larger frame could even fit under the net.

There was no conversation anymore as we lined up to the race. Kanzaki and Shibata were keeping to themselves at this point, and I had noticed that after each race they were more and more reserved in their actions, understandably so.

Their class was struggling badly. Races they had been expecting to win had ended in unsatisfactory results, and part of that involved their own teammates. There was nothing they could do about it at this point besides continuing to struggle, and the longer that went on, the longer the looming inevitability of their situation existed, the worse their mental would get.

I had no doubts that Class A could manage this scenario successfully. Yes, they might lose, but in the end, they were a united front. They might lose today, but there were always more opportunities to come in the future.

The starters pistol fired, and we were off. Much like the previous events, Kouenji and I pulled away from the pack at an equal speed. Going flat out here would only serve problems in the future. We only had to run a short distance, before hopping on a balance beam. Sprinting onto it at full speed with no control would only bring the possibility of slipping.

It was the balance beam where a noticeable difference form. Kouenji, for all his talents, couldn't match my speed, noticeably slowing down as to not fall off, not having the same balance that I did. It wasn't a long distance, but a small gap formed between us, as I hopped off the other end.

That slight disparity was made apparent in the short sprint to the net where I extended the lead even further. Without waiting for a moment, I threw myself forward onto the ground and crawled through the net. It was certainly an odd way of moving, but I didn't have time to relax. A quick look back showed that Kouenji was right behind me, not struggling at all with the net.

Reaching the end, I picked myself up and pulled my legs into a sack. I had been watching the training for this and had settled on the strategy of big powerful jumps. Some people preferred to do lots of small jumps as quickly as possible, but I had found that launching myself forward as far as possible with a lot more effort was the most successful method of moving.

It wasn't long before I crossed the finish line a couple of jumps before Kouenji did. A clear difference in our finishing time.

"Ah..."

"Are you satisfied with that?" I asked the man stretching out next to me. We had moved away from the finishing line at this point, and it was just the two of us, watching as the next group began their obstacle course race. Hearing my voice Kouenji looked over to me, a resigned look on his face.

"Just once, I suppose, I am capable of admitting there is someone better than me."

I wasn't expecting him to say that.

"I'm sure you understand, Ayanokouji-boy, that level of superiority. For years, I trained, and eventually defeated every single person I trained against. Not once have I come across someone to match me. I find it... disappointing."

In some ways I understood, and in others it was a completely foreign feeling.

"Right now, I can accept I may not be the best, the ultimate human."

"I'm surprised you can admit that," I honestly replied. It was a significant change from the arrogance that permeated Kouenji the entire year.

"I surprise myself, demon-boy. I truly never thought I would say such words out loud." I didn't miss the implication behind that. I didn't reply either but stood there as the taller boy threw his head back and laughed. "Hahaha! It's a new experience, I must admit."

"For what it's worth, I have the utmost respect for you. I don't believe there are many people, even in that place, that could match you." Actually, I had no idea about how talented the other generations were, but someone who could match me so well was likely to be competitive enough.

"I do not require your empty platitudes. My heart has not

shattered from such a tragic realisation as of today. Nay! Kouenji Rokusuke will continue onwards, as he has always done. And as is expected of me, I shall reach true perfection."

That was right. Part of Kouenji's difficult mentality came from the expectations his parents placed upon him. Of course, it would be hard for him to accept such a realisation. He had my respect for being so honest with himself in this moment.

"You've beaten me once. That's more than anyone else has ever managed to do." I was going to continue, but the two of us had gotten to close to the Class D tent, and some of our classmates had come pouring out. Sudou too ambushed us from behind, having just finished his race.

"Ah, here they are, finally! Us three 're gonna win this tournament togetOOFFF!" Sudou walked up and wrapped his arms around our necks, or tried to at least, before Kouenji spun around and flipped him on his back.

"To think you would dare dirty my body with filth from yours. Now I must cleanse my hands of your stench," Kouenji grumbled, having used just one hand to flip him. Sudou was too busy wheezing on the ground to argue back.

"Kouenji-kun, what happened to all that perfect existence stuff. Haven't you come second in like, almost everything? Ha, serves you right for being so cocky!" Shinohara was one of the girls to have come out of the tent and was taking no time at all to dig into Kouenji. Over our time at school, he had taken great pleasure in showing her his elocution techniques.

"Hm? Are you suggesting that my lack of victory shatters my nature?" He asked back, seemingly baffled by her question.

"Um, yeah? You came second, Ayanokouji-kun beat you, so clearly you aren't perfect. It's just sad if you keep that up," Shinohara stuck back, almost laughing. The grin on Kouenji's face told a different story, almost as if he had expected that response.

"Why, it's rather simple bitch-girl. Ayanokouji-boy isn't human; therefore, I still remain as the perfect existence." And just like that he had reframed his thinking to remain as the peak of human evolution, and snapped back at Shinohara, all without hesitating. "If you'll excuse me, I must rest before claiming victory in the three-legged race. It truly would be unfortunate if I became ill, would it not?"

No one was willing to interrupt Kouenji's good and cooperative mood, and so they let him wander off. Despite everyone watching as he left, no one was able to follow where he disappeared to. If it were possible, I would wholeheartedly believe he teleported away.

"Wa, he's so mean! You wouldn't be that cruel, would you,

Ayanokouji-kun?" Shinohara asked me, moving slightly closer. My eyes caught Kikyou's and recognised the resignation in them. She had warned me of this, but I hadn't expected anything so soon.

"He's done a lot more to contribute than you Shinohara," I coldly replied, brushing off the annoyance. She could provide me with nothing. I already had Kikyou and somewhat Karuizawa now, so Shinohara would only serve to cause me problems.

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Kouenji teamed up with me for the boys three-legged race, which we handily won. It interested me to note that Class A hadn't put Shibata and Kanzaki together for that-something I had noticed when Ichinose gave me their participation table-but neither were in the same race. Class A had found some consistency with their partners, because every one of their pairs did well.

As it stood, the Red Team had been slowly widening the gap in points, not by much but consistently. If I had to guess, the first years were having an almost negligible impact on that difference. As it was, Class D was doing rather well. We had been put into a decent spot due to my manipulation of the participation tables, and most of the class had forgiven whoever changed them at this point. Class A on the other hand was struggling severely. With the two average results for Class B and C, it all evened out to a close race.

If I was worried about other classes results, it was certainly Sakayanagi's. Ryuuen's class wasn't performing terribly, but with a lack of leadership and motivation they weren't amazing. Average results across the board, winning some races and getting crushed in others. Just what you would expect from a leadership class that couldn't trust information given to them.

As I watched, I could see him relaxing on the ground next to Amikura just away from the Class A tent, not even spending time with his own classmates.

Sakayanagi had taken a much more devious approach, and while Class B wasn't winning everything, they were certainly performing consistently well, slowly accruing a large number of points. Class D was doing well, but we only had a few students capable of matching or beating Class B's athletic talent. Slowly but surely over their large numbers of successes, and even their average results outmatched ours, Class B was taking the lead in the first years. It was an inevitability that I simply didn't have the resources to match without direct sabotage.

Most of my class hadn't noticed that. It was easy to be caught up in our few heroes, seeing the constant victories and not worrying. No one was paying close enough attention or tallying points up in their mind to recognise the likely result of today. I suspected that

was for the better. If our class knew ahead of time possible endings for today, the morale they got from our victories would become meaningless.

"What's up?" I asked to the person who had just joined me.

Kikyou took a seat next to me and handed me a copy of our participation table with four names circled.

"This is your group for the cavalry," she said. I looked it over. It could certainly be worse. Hirata and Miyake were both supporting me, along with Sotomura. I was impressed that the latter hadn't given up and claimed to be too tired like the other boy, but he was still doing his best.

"It'll do. As long as we target Class B first, we should be able to win." Even if they were united, each class would still have their own strategies and Class B was undoubtedly the biggest threat to us.

"Kouenji also said he'd participate. You really figured him out, didn't you?"

"I gave Kouenji what he wanted. We can count on him for the rest of the day." There was almost no one in the school I would say that about but the enigma that was Kouenji was someone that for today I could almost completely rely upon.

"No matter how many times you confirm it I still can't quite believe that."

We sat in silence and watched the last obstacle course race for the first year girls. Horikita was in this one, and like every other race, she was up against strong participants from the White Team – this time it was Class C.

"What is she looking back for..." I murmured. Horikita was in first place but kept looking behind her. Every time she did, she lost a bit of speed, and she should know by now how far in front she was – not much.

The final sprint came along, and slowly but surely Kinoshita was drawing closer and closer to Horikita, the two of them side by side now, fighting for first spot.

"Wait, what the hell just happened?!" Kikyou exclaimed.

The two of them had crashed into each other and taken a major tumble, limbs twisting and turning as they rolled around. While this happened, every other competitor raced past them, finishing the race.

We watched in silence as Horikita slowly lifted herself off the ground and limped to the end to finish in seventh place. Kinoshita pathetically tried to drag herself forward, her leg not responding enough to stand before she collapsed where she was and was carried off the track.

"How terrible! Horikita-san came seventh, and probably hurt herself, along with Kinoshita-san. I hope they're alright!" I could hear the malicious glee in her voice upon watching Horikita struggle.

"I guess Ryuuen is beginning his plans." So far, nothing had been done, but the day was only half over. It wasn't even close to being too late to try for a win. Taking out Horikita after putting her under pressure all morning was a fine way to start.

"Are you saying it was targeted? But Horikita-san could never prove that, and honestly I think she's too proud to try."

Kikyou was right on the money. Horikita would never willingly stoop as low as to accuse someone in order to get better results. It would be insulting to her efforts in her mind, and a cheap and hollow victory.

"I think the real problem is Horikita proving she didn't do anything."

"Eh?"

"Think about it. She had a lead, and slowly lost it, constantly checking where the person behind her was. Then she falls, and Kinoshita is hurt badly enough to have to pull out. It all looks very suspicious for Horikita now." Kikyou's face lit up at the revelation.

"Oh, I get it. So basically, she'll get pinned for purposefully targeting Kinoshita-san, one of their best runners too."

"It's certainly a possibility." Of course, Horikita wasn't above dirty tactics, but not at the expense of herself. She wasn't going to make the sacrifice play here, not after claiming the athletic students should pull their weight.

I couldn't be sure if this was Ryuuen's plan, or just a coincidence, but he most definitely wouldn't ignore the opportunity. But based on all the pressure Horikita had been under in every race, it seemed likely it was the former, with the help of Sakayanagi, to take out one of our heavy hitters.

"Shouldn't you be going to the three-legged race?" I questioned. The school was calling for the first-year girls now, and we couldn't have anyone missing out.

"Ah, you're right! Make sure to watch for me, Kiyotaka-kun!" she smiled, before running off to join her partner, Onodera.

As expected, they won their race handily, while Horikita and Matsushita struggled, coming second last due to the former's injury.

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While the girls were doing their three-legged race, the first-year boys headed over to the arena for the cavalry battle.

It was Class A and D against Class B and C. To be honest, I didn't have high hopes for victory.

Class B and C by far had the best athletic students in our year. Not only that, but we were up against a time limit. The match only lasted for three minutes, and even if I performed well enough, stealing headbands and protecting my own, it might not be enough if the rest of the horsemen collapsed.

Okitani had proven to be rather apt at dodging grabs in training. He wasn't as good at grabbing headbands, but there also weren't many other options in the class to have as horsemen, so he ended up rounding out the group of four, alongside Sudou, Kouenji and myself.

Class A was also fielding their best as horsemen. Kanzaki, Shibata, Beppu and Fujiwara. The only person who seemed to have any confidence was Kouenji, who was refusing to pay any attention to strategy.

"I think our best course of strategy is to target Class B. We have no idea how Class C will react, so it's best to take out the strongest. If all eight of us can mob them, we can win easily." Kanzaki easily outlined a winning strategy that was quickly adopted by everyone.

"Yeah, those idiot Class C kids don't have anything today. We take out Class B, we've won already!" Sudou added enthusiasm to the conversation.

"Let's win this and bring it home for Red Team!" Shibata cheered, getting a lot of support from both our classes. I could understand why, like Sudou, he had been put somewhat in charge of his class for the festival.

I looked off to the side to where Kouenji was conferring with his three mounts. Surprisingly, he had made a request of classmates, three boys who weren't very fit, but I didn't think that was the point. All of them could easily be manipulated to do what he wanted.

Realising I should do the same, I turned to my group of Hirata, Miyake and Sotomura. "Follow my instructions, even if they go against the plan. Things probably won't go as easily as Kanzaki thinks," I explained.

"You're probably right, Ayanokouji. We'll follow you," Miyake agreed.

"Yes, Ayanokouji-dono, we shall serve at your pleasure."

"Don't mess this up," Hirata warned me.

All sixteen horsemen mounted up on their jockeys and faced each other across the open field, eight versus eight.

Looking across was a rather fearsome sight. Even Ryuuen had decided to get involved. Finally, he was beginning to make his move.

All of my teammates were giving each other looks and nods,

confirming the plan and our courage in this fight. Everyone except for...

"Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more! Ha, we shall crush these peasants like the French dogs they are!"

Kouenji was busy quoting Shakespear, ignoring the upset or confused looks everyone gave him. It seemed not many people had read Henry V.

The whistle blew, and the two classes ran at each other, or more precisely, Class A and D ran at Class B, while Class C held themselves back.

For a moment it seemed like they weren't doing anything, before it became obvious. The four horsemen had split into two and were trying to wrap around behind us. Ryuuen had expected us to assume that Class C would be less than helpful and planned accordingly. It seemed no one else had noticed just yet either. I alone couldn't hold off four jockeys, eventually they would get past. It was a clever plan, to account for our misguided assumption and exploit it. It was going to work.

Or it should have worked. I ducked under a grabbing arm and turned to watch as the madman himself Kouenji shouted at his subordinates.

"Tally-ho! An enemy is sighted!" Hearing his direction, his cavalry unit turned away from the main battle and went straight for one of the pairs, ignoring everything else around him. "Sally forth! We must slay the enemy! What-ho!"

I felt another arm brush closely to my head as I dodged out of instinct and paid more attention to the main battle.

Class B was surrounded by five units from our combined squad, with the commanders from Class A and D holding back. It wasn't long before I managed to reach out and grab a headband off of Hashimoto, causing his unit to collapse to the ground. The odds were easily in our favour, but that could change at any moment.

I gave a tap to my three troops, a signal we had worked out earlier to retreat backwards. There were more important problems than a 4v3 that we were likely to win.

Kouenji had managed to snag one of the headbands of the pair he was battling and was yelling even more commands. "About turn! Forth to battle once more!" Perhaps in another life he had been a knight. He had the second horsemen pinned down, and it wouldn't be long before he secured that headband. Since that wasn't a problem, I directed my steed towards our commanders, who had just been ambushed by Ryuuen and Tokitou.

Ryuuen was a fearsome sight, resting on the shoulders of Albert, with two of his classmates holding on to Albert only because the

rules said they had to, not because they were contributing.

Hirata and Miyake recognised the situation, and we charged right for them. Stealing a commander's headband was worth 100 points, something I wanted to avoid.

Hearing us coming, our allied commanders stepped back and allowed us to barrel through at full speed. Not expecting this, Tokitou failed to react in time, and I slipped the headband off of his head as we came past. I slipped it onto my wrist, now holding two headbands, but for a moment I felt danger. Acting completely on instinct I ducked my head and felt Ryuuen's arm go right over it.

"You really dodged that, huh?" Ryuuen seemed shocked that I had managed it.

My horse spun around until the two of us were face to face. Luckily, the commanders for Class A and D had backed off and were staying safe. Engaging now thinking it was secure with a numbers disadvantage would only lead to losses.

"Your plan fell apart really quickly," I remarked.

Ryuuen smirked. "To be honest I didn't expect that nutter over there," he said gesturing at Kouenji, "to regress to medieval brutality. My mistake," he finished sarcastically. Fair enough. I hadn't expected Kouenji to be that proactive either. But from the way he was waving his hands about in the air, now holding two headbands, he was clearly playing it up for the crowd.

"Y'know, a long time ago, being crazy meant something," I reasoned.

"Yeah, in the time of savages. We're a civilised people now, Ayanokouji," Ryuuen laughed with a savage smile.

"We've only got a minute left. Let's finish this." The competition had been fun, but there wasn't actually much strategy involved I had learned. Just have a talented madman run at them, and everything falls apart.

Ryuuen grinned. "I couldn't agree more." Albert rushed forwards until we were within reaching distance, and Ryuuen instantly made a move for my headband. I shifted my head to the side slightly and exploiting his overreach I made my own move. But the moment my hand touched his headband it slipped off slightly.

I narrowed my eyes at the realisation. Ryuuen had coated his own headband in a sticky substance, making it hard to grab quickly.

But that wouldn't be enough to stop me.

I dodged his hands a few more times, battering them away while formulating my own plan.

Reaching out, I slid my hand up his face, from his foreheard until it collided with the headband, and slipped it off. It came off with some effort, and just before the whistle blew, I had it in my hands.

We pulled back, and everyone dismounted, sighing with relief. More than a few horses collapsed with exhaustion, notably all of Kouenji's but they had done their job.

I looked around to see who was still standing. It seemed that Class B had managed to grab two of Class A's headbands before Kouenji came about and ambushed them from behind, allowing us to clean up. It was an overwhelming victory for the Red Team.

Eyeing Ryuuen closely, I made an obvious show of wiping down his headband. "I wouldn't want to defeat you over something so stupid. Take more care next time," I warned him.

Ryuuen wasn't fazed at all though. "I assumed that if anyone would steal it, you would, and I knew you wouldn't turn me in, Ayanokouji. Looks like it all turned out fine kukuku!"

The judges counted the results and issued the points to each Class. Kouenji and I had both collected three headbands each, but since one of mine was a commander, I won our mock competition once again.

Class A lost one to Class B and managed to grab one of theirs. Class D collected seven.

Things were going well.

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Things were not going well.

The girl's cavalry event had begun, and it didn't take long for things to collapse.

If I had to blame one person, it would be Amikura.

She had taken it upon herself to become the commander and was hiding at the back of the red team, shouting her useless orders to her teammates. From what I was watching, it seemed that all she did was cause more problems. The wrong people were responding, leaving openings that our opponents exploited every time. It was infuriating to watch, but at the same time I didn't think they stood a chance even if she wasn't causing problems.

Sakayanagi herself had decided to participate as the commander of the Class B team. She had perched herself on top of Kamuro and was calmly dictating the flow of the game. Unlike our side, she both took into account the ability of people to respond in their current situation, but her subordinates actually listened.

I watched helplessly as the combined and united forces of Sakayanagi's Class B and C girl power smashed through the Red Team. Karuizawa, riding on the back of Shinohara and friends, managed to grab one, but it was a consolation prize.

"I'm going to need to have a proper talk to Amikura-san about taking things seriously," Kanzaki muttered angrily as we watched.

"Have you considered that she's the traitor?" I instigated.

Kanzaki's face flew through hundreds of emotions, before settling on unreadable.

"I find that hard to believe. She's not the type to throw away an exam for no reason."

Was it worth it? I was debating over whether to mention the cruise ship incident. In the end, I decided that was more valuable now to keep in reserve. There was a much simpler method.

"I don't mean on purpose. But how did your class plan?"

"Everyone decided to leave it up to Ichinose-san, Shibata, Amikura-san and I to keep it secretive," he grudgingly admitted.

"That doesn't necessarily mean it has to be one of you of course. But if there was one person to act sloppy and mess up, Amikura seems the most likely to me."

Finally, Kanzaki turned to me. "What's your game here, Ayanokouji? Are you trying to split up my class again?" he spat.

"Obviously. But you also can't ignore what I'm saying, because even if I was in league with the traitor, the fact remains that someone betrayed you. And that's something you are incapable of ignoring."

Kanzaki's fists were turning white from clenching them. He could hate me all he wanted, be mad at my attempt to sabotage his class, but that thought would never leave his mind. The question of who the traitor was, that was something he could never ignore.

Authors Notes:

So, I had a lot of fun with Kouenji this chapter. Big development in his mind, and then just going at it in the cavalry. Bit OOC but it was too fun not to write.

Would Sakayanagi get involved in the cavalry? For fun, yes.

Finally halfway through the day for the sports festival, and this is definitely shaping up to be the longest story arc I've written so far.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 9 - Festival Part 4

Once the cavalry event was over, the school gave us an hour's break for lunch. I was surprised that they could fit such a long break into the schedule, but we had been rushing through events, so a long break was necessary.

Most of the grade had spread out amongst themselves, and even for a moment it felt like the barrier between classes had dropped. There was mingling between classes, people eating lunch together. It was something that had been happening more and more since the start of term.

This surprised me a little, since we were in the midst of a competition, but it seemed like human nature to seek out friendship. If our school hadn't organised it so we would compete, this likely would have been the state of our grade since the beginning of the year.

Even with the competition there were plenty of people who had friends across classes. People like Ichinose and Kikyou who were endlessly friendly with everyone had already breached that barrier, so now that there was less to fear from Class C it was easy enough for everyone to branch out.

Kikyou had insisted on making me lunch today, and so we sat down a little way away from everyone where we probably wouldn't be heard to eat. She handed me a bento box with a smile, and watched slightly nervously as I opened it.

It was a perfectly ordinary lunch, complete with rice, teriyaki chicken and some greens. I could have easily made a much more impressive lunch than this. And yet, there was something special about having a meal made for you, that made it much more enticing.

"It looks nice. Thank you."

The nervousness disappeared, and Kikyou relaxed slightly, having gotten approval for my meal. "Ah, it's no trouble. I wanted to practice the cooking you've taught me."

We dug into our respective lunches, only to find it was a lot better than I had expected. Simple, but well prepared.

"I'm surprised you can have lunch with me," I said.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Kikyou growled. We were far enough away from people that she could let down her

mask somewhat. "Do you not want to eat my food, is that it?"

"No, it's delicious. But I thought you would have to be spending time with other people and cultivating more friendships."

Kikyou's life goal was to learn the secrets of everyone around her. To that end, she spent most of her time surrounded by classmates and friends, trying to worm her way into their lives as a confidant and trusted friend. It was insidious and effective.

She slumped a little at my question. "It's a big day. I wanted some time away from everyone when I could just be me." And I was the only person she could do that around.

"An exhausting day," I surmised.

"No, school is exhausting. Sitting in a class and having lunch with every bitch there is, listening to the woes of ugly boys who want a girlfriend and will never get one is exhausting. Today isn't exhausting. It's complete and utter fucking torture." She kept her voice low so that no one would hear what she was saying, but the anger was just as prevalent, perhaps even more scary than if she had been screaming it out.

"I have to cheer for people I despise, be happy when they succeed. Constantly motivate people I want nothing more for than to snap their ankle while they run. Do you have any idea how many times I've stopped Class A fighting amongst themselves? Ichinose isn't even stepping in at all, she's just watching with an upset look. The happiest I felt all day was when Horikita hurt herself. At least then I can annoy her by being overly caring."

She tilted to the side and let herself fall until she was resting her head on my shoulder. "You're my only real friend," Kikyou bitterly admitted. "I just wanted to spend time with someone who actually cares about me, and someone I can actually care about."

I sighed, and began to stroke her head, giving the damaged girl a modicum of comfort.

"Plus, you having lunch with me gives another benefit," Kikyou said with a smile. I looked down, before following her eyes to where she was looking.

A stiff smile was on Shinohara's face as she looked at the two of us. Kikyou was responding with a sickly sweet one. Once Shinohara noticed I was looking at her, she quickly turned away and went to eat with some of her new friends in Class C.

Kikyou began to giggle at the situation.

"What's going on with her?" I asked.

"Ah, that bitch has been talking about you all day since you started to win races. Apparently, she pissed of Karuizawa somehow and is kind of a loner in class now. So, she's looking for someone to boost her status, like Hirata did for Karuizawa," Kikyou explained.

"And did you explain to her that she's worthless to me?"

"In a nicer way, yes I did. She didn't seem to like it though. She's such an ugly cow, but she refuses to accept it. Disgusting pig of a girl, honestly."

They were harsh words, but I couldn't quite disagree. Shinohara certainly wasn't that attractive, but she kept her position through being a bully to those who disagreed. I guess Karuizawa had trusted my assurances enough to finally break off with Shinohara, no longer needing to stay on the same side of a potential bully for safety.

"I never explained what happened with the Class A participation table, did I?" This story would certainly help Kikyou's mood improve.

"Oh, I was wondering how you did it. So, who's the traitor?" She asked, voice peaking in curiosity, although she didn't move from our current position.

"Ichinose."

"Bullshit." Understandably, she didn't believe it.

"I'm serious. To protect one of her classmates from being bullied to dropping out, she gave up the participation table and is keeping quiet. You said that she hasn't been very involved, right?" As I explained a light suddenly grew in Kikyou's eyes.

"Hahaha that's so cruel! So she has to stand there and watch as everything falls apart. Oh, I'm certainly going to enjoy tormenting her today."

"Don't give anything away," I warned.

"Of course not. But simple questions like 'is there any way I can help your class' or 'surely you know who the traitor is Ichinose-san!' That stuff will drive her insane. Finally, I get to bully the cow-tit whore and she can't stop me."

There was one other thing I wanted to check. "If I told you a rumour about someone in her class, could you have actually gotten them to drop out?" I hadn't actually checked with Kikyou ahead of time, since I didn't want to give out that leverage until now, where it was too late to change things, but I was curious.

"Eh? I mean, it depends on the rumour and the person, but probably yeah, I could do it. What was the secret?" she asked.

"Shiranami Chihiro has a massive crush on Ichinose and confessed to her earlier in the year," I revealed.

"That timid cunt is the one Ichinose is protecting? She'd sacrifice her class for her? I mean, I don't really want to, but if I had to yeah, it would be easy to fuck over her life here," Kikyou admitted. There was a fire in her voice. From my understanding of her, she didn't have any problem with Shirinami that made her hate her. It was the power in the situation that Kikyou held that was most alluring. "But

how do you know about that?"

I shrugged. "Ichinose wanted me to be her fake boyfriend to turn down the confession. You might also want to know that Ichinose had never been confessed to before that time."

"No, there's no way that miss cow-tits has never been... fake boyfriend?"

"Yeah, she wanted me to act that way to reject the confession," I explained.

"Oh, her day just got a whole lot worse. Hehehe, I'm going to have so much fun torturing her."

"Again, don't go too far. I need her to keep it a secret at least for the rest of the day."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Kikyou replied. Then, hesitantly, she continued. "Thank you for telling me, Kiyotaka."

"It's no problem. You deserve to know what's going on. Another dark little secret for your collection."

"Hey, I don't have dark secrets – I have bright ones." I had no idea what she meant by that.

We sat in silence for a bit longer, watching as our classmates ate their own lunch. Most people had brought some with them today, since no one wanted to be walking to the cafeteria and back.

It wasn't long after though that shouting began to waft through the air, coming from somewhere nearby.

"Who is that?" I wondered.

"I think... it sounds like Amikura and Kanzaki, but I don't know why they'd be shouting at each other." Ah, so things had finally come to a head.

"That would be my fault. I may have suggested that Amikura carelessly lost the participation table to Kanzaki earlier." I explained the intracacies of the situation.

"God, you're genuinely awful. Is there anything you won't do?"

"Probably, but I haven't reached that stage just yet."

"Haha, well, we should probably go watch the results of your hard work," Kikyou suggested. I sighed, and picked myself up from the ground, dragging Kikyou up when she held her hands out to me.

We walked over to the Class A tent, where a small crowd of people were forming, due to the argument going on. In the center were Amikura and Kanzaki staring down at each other. Kikyou broke away from me and began to mingle around with the people watching, trying to find out what we had missed.

Unsurprisingly, it was mostly Class 1-A students here. Class D students had all gone out to eat with friends, and the senior students weren't too interested in their juniors having a spat. I could see Manabu and even further off Nagumo watching though.

"Kanzaki-kun, what are you trying to say? Come on, say it!"

"I'm just asking if you were the one to leak our participation table."

The argument hadn't been going for long, but it was already getting heated.

"You really think you'd betray our class, Kanzaki-kun? How little faith do you have in me?!"

"I'm not saying it was on purpose, it's just..."

"No, go on, finish that! It's just what?"

"You're not the most put together person. I could understand if it was an accident," Kanzaki finally got out. Amikura's face was red with anger at this slight to her person.

"Are you saying I was careless, is that it? That I'm not 'put together'? Sure, I like to have fun, but that doesn't make me any less dedicated to the class than you, Kan-za-ki-kun!" She punctuated his name by poking him firmly in the chest with every sound.

Kanzaki responded by grabbing her wrist before she could pull her arm back.

"Let go of me," Amikura growled.

"There were only a few people in the class who had the whole participation table," Kanzaki almost whispered. "Out of all of us, I find you the least trustworthy, Amikura-san."

"And why should I trust you either, dipshit? You're hurting me now, Kanzaki-kun."

Kanzaki let her wrist go, and Amikura instantly pulled it back to her chest, wincing slightly.

"Is that how you get off, toying with innocent maidens? I never would have guessed," she teased.

"Stop acting dumb for once and use your brain! Someone leaked it, Amikura-san. I just want to know who!"

"And so do I! Stop accusing me without any evidence! It's almost as if you want it to be me! Is that it? You want me to step down, Kanzaki-kun? Because I don't think I can work with someone who jumps the gun like this."

"As if you don't jump the gun, Amikura-san. Who do you think lost us the cavalry battle, because that wasn't Class D's fault."

Suddenly I felt a presence by my side. Looking down I saw Sakayanagi had come to join me, with Kamuro right behind her.

"Fufufu this is sure to be interesting, Ayanokouji-kun. Thank you for provoking this situation."

"I'm rather enjoying it myself. I assume you have something planned?" I asked her.

"Not myself, no. But this is more than either of us ever dreamed of getting. Neither of us imagined you helping so much when we

were planning."

There was something odd about that phrasing, but I let it go for now.

I looked across the circle, to see Ichinose standing next to Kikyou. The two of them were talking about something, I assumed this situation due to the pained expression on Ichinose's face. There was a savage flash of pleasure on Kikyou's when she had a chance to let it out.

Ichinose caught me looking at her, and responded with a defeated, grudging smile. There was no happiness left in her, as she watched the class she had lovingly helped over the year be split apart again, but this time there was nothing she could do about it.

The argument had collapsed into childish bickering, and even Kanzaki, famous for keeping a level head was having a difficult time talking to Amikura. Clearly, he had started the conversation in a reasonable manner, but it was Amikura's immaturity that made it hard to question. It was a talent she had to be unpredictable, but it also made working with her difficult. That was why Ichinose rounded out the group, and Himeno did something. What role the latter played I wasn't yet sure.

The crowd parted as someone pushed their way through. From the slight tensing of Sakayanagi next to me, I realised who it was the instant before they appeared. This was the reckoning of Class A, and the time to see whether Amikura's plan with Ryuuen would be succesful.

"Mako-chan, baby, what's going on here?" Ryuuen showed a surprisingly caring side towards his girlfriend.

"Kakeru, Kanzaki's being a bitch. Can you explain that I wasn't the one to give you the participation table?"

"Oh, right, we did agree not to let our feelings get in the way of class conflicts didn't we," Ryuuen explained loudly, for the benefit of everyone listening. I could see the trap closing in already.

"Yeah, so Kanzaki-kun, back off. I didn't leak the Class A participation table." Amikura turned back to face Kanzaki, missing the deadly grin on Ryuuen's face.

"But Mako-chan, you still gave it to me."

Those words silenced everyone around, even those discussing in murmurs from the side.

"Eh?" Amikura didn't understand what Ryuuen was saying.

"Well, when you threw yourself at me at the pool I was shocked, but then I realised that you loved me. I love you to, my precious Mako-chan. And nothing made me happier when you gave me the participation table on our Sunday date."

That was the flaw in Amikura's plan. She had successfully shown

Ryuuen to have a heart, and wasn't the tyrant to be feared. In theory, that should have broken the strength of Class C, but it also could backfire onto her. Because in order to do so, Amikura had to expose herself to the same risk. And Ryuuen had managed the situation much better.

In fact, I was noticing more and more Class C students appearing at the edge of this situation, all grinning at the position their leader had put Class A in.

"No... I didn't give it to you." Amikura pointlessly denied the situation, but no one would believe her when the enemy admitted it.

"I don't know if you thought that you could break me off from my class, or maybe you did actually like me. Either way, it's pretty fucking sad Mako-chan." The caring in his tone was gone, and now her name sounded cruel coming out of his mouth. The Class C students began laughing. As expected, the entire class had been in on the plot. "You dumb bitch, you actually thought you'd kicked me off my throne? My entire class put me back up. I'm the tyrant and they want to serve me. But when you handed me the participation table, I'm pretty sure I saw true love in your eyes. It took everything I had not to laugh at how retarded you were kukuku!"

Mako opened her mouth to protest, but before she could move, Ryuuen leaned forwards and before anyone could react, he stole a kiss from her. It wasn't a long one, just a peck, but Amikura seemed stunned by his actions. Ryuuen didn't even change his attitude, a small kiss not affecting him at all.

From behind me, I heard Kamuro say something about a 'chad'.

"To think you'd get lost in your own trap. How fucking dumb are you, Mako? Don't worry, Class C isn't going easy on anyone anymore." Ryuuen smirked, arms wide, the undisputed king in this situation. "You lose, Amikura." He turned and walked away from us, heading back to the White Team area, his class laughing along with him.

"So... it was you in the end, Amikura-san." Kanzaki sounded more tired and disappointed than mad. He understood the argument that Ryuuen had made, of Amikura falling for her own trap.

"I didn't do it. Kanzaki-kun, I didn't give him the participation table. Please believe me!" Amikura was almost desperate, but Kanzaki, and most of the class just turned their back on her and moved off. Despite how tightly-knit the class was, there was no easy way to deny Ryuuen's words. To them, Amikura was guilty.

I was impressed. Even with all the situations I had entertained, I had never expected Ryuuen to be so effective. His entire class had been in on the scheme, probably since that day at the pool. All of

them pretending he was lost in the throes of love, acting like they didn't have a leader. That level of faith and trust, to underperform in the morning just to crush the leadership of Class A – it was impressive. It was a level of trust that rivalled Class A's unity. To his class, Ryuuen was their king, almost a god.

"Fufufu he has a flair for the dramatic, does he not?"

"I'm honestly astounded. I didn't expect Class C to be capable of such a deception," I admitted aloud.

"Amikura-san was too smart for her own good. A clever deception, I admit, but it will never work against someone like Ryuuen. The poor girl is out of her depth. The ducks tried to plan too much."

I thought back to when Sakayanagi had first made that comparison, the day the sports festival was announced. "You've been planning together since then?"

"Fufufu Ryuuen knew the relationship would eventually be useful to exploit, and he got me on board that same day. This was an inevitability, although you should receive some of the credit for helping it along. Kanzaki wouldn't have been so aggressive without your prodding." So she had noticed my conversation.

"You two are psychopaths," Kamuro commented. "That girl isn't going to be trusted ever again for the rest of school."

"Probably," I shrugged. "That's the price she pays for getting involved with something she isn't prepared for."

"Well said, Ayanokouji-kun. She could have lived an ordinary life if only she stayed out of our way."

"Ugh. Can we go get lunch now? The 'entertainment of the year' is over, right?" Kamuro complained.

"Fufufu yes, the next events will be starting soon. I'm interested to see how well Class C does now."

"Enjoy your victory, Sakayanagi."

If there was one person to have come out the best in this situation, it was undoubtedly her.

"I'd like to speak to you at the end of the day, Ayanokouji-kun. Please come and meet me at the White Team's tent."

Saying this, Sakayanagi and Kamuro began their slow walk away back to the White Team.

There was still a while until the next events, despite what Sakayanagi had said. She simply had to factor in her slow walking speed. Until then, I needed something to do. There was one conversation I could have.

I walked away from the tents to find a girl sitting alone. In the confusion, Amikura had slipped away and was huddled up beside a tree. She wasn't crying, but there was a slightly vacant look in her

eyes.

"Amikura."

She didn't react to her name, so I took a seat beside her, leaning against the same tree.

"I believe you didn't do it," I comforted her.

"That doesn't matter. The rest of my class has already decided I'm guilty." So, she was able to carry a conversation.

I sat in silence for a while, before imparting some valuable knowledge. "I know who betrayed your class."

"Do you have any proof?" she asked. It was a valid question, since there was enough 'evidence' to prove it was her.

"No."

"Then why bother?"

"Because you deserve to know who put you in this situation."

A minute of silence, wherein I didn't press. Then...

"Who was it?" It came out almost as a whisper.

"Ichinose."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

Finally she looked up.

"And how did you figure that out? Did she tell you, or... no. You were the traitor in Class D, weren't you?" A perfect understanding, but not the one I wanted.

"No, I learned it from the real traitor in my class. The one who changed our participation table and gave it to the White Team. Hirata." It was very easy to mix lies with truth. Once she interrogated Ichinose, Ichinose would probably break and admit it. From there, she would believe everything else I said.

"And why on earth would Hirata-kun betray his class. Why would Ichinose for that matter? I call bullshit." A bit of her former energy had returned to her voice.

"Ichinose was blackmailed. Do you really think that Hirata hasn't picked up on a few bits of information over his time here? Do you think it's beyond Ichinose to abandon the class to protect one of you?" I prompted more critical thinking in the damaged girl.

"No, she definitely would. I see... that makes sense, but why Hirata-kun? What does he get out of it?"

"Horikita and Hirata have a feud going on. Horikita was willing to do the same plan as you, let some of your classmates be sacrifices to get the most points. Hirata couldn't allow that. Didn't you notice how Horikita was targeted, and at the same time, Class D is in a relatively safe position, even the unathletic students? Hirata sabotaged your class to ensure his classmates couldn't lose."

So many lies and truths mixed together untangling it would be an

impossibility. The girl next to me though, was taking it as the word of god.

"I see... that does make sense as well. But I still don't know why you'd tell me. This could all be a lie. I was sure you were the most suspect."

"I'm guilty in some way. I could have stopped this, but I let it happen for selfish reasons. I just wasn't expecting you to be hit this hard in the crossfire."

"Ha! As if you actually care about me and my wellbeing. I bet you're just happy that Class A got shredded apart by Ryuuen." She almost spat out his name.

"Actually, I'm not. I put a lot of work into your class, and you interest me, Amikura. You aren't like the rest of your class. Out of everyone, you fascinate me the most. As a leader, I want to see what you can do, when not hampered with betrayal."

"Fat chance. My class is done with me."

"But you aren't done with your class. There's still half a day left of this festival. And then another two and a half years. Are you going to give up now, and spend the rest of your time here alone?"

"Maybe I should. I fucked up, really badly."

"No, you didn't." This negative attitude was making it hard to get through to her. "Ichinose messed up. Kanzaki jumped to conclusions. Ryuuen was cruel. But all you did was your best."

Amikura sighed, letting herself roll onto the grass, looking up at the blue sky. "I know you want something from me. That's the only reason you're being nice right now."

"Of course I want something," I admitted. "I owe you a favour, remember? I can't have you give up while I'm in your debt."

"Ha! That's right, you do owe me."

"Come on, Amikura. Are you just going to lie here all day? Or is the Red Team going to make a comeback."

Like everyone I had used at this school, Amikura had her moment. When everything in her life had come crashing down, this was her chance to take the hand I reached out to her.

Finally, a small smile appeared on her face, small but genuine.

"You're right. I can't give up now. I forgot why I became a class leader in the first place. It wasn't to be a leader, but to help my class. I guess I forgot that at some point." And then, "Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Don't thank me yet. I'm forcing you back into the belly of the beast."

"Oh, but didn't you know, Ayanokouji-kun? I thrive the best in ridiculous situations. I gotta get back the name of dragon tamer."

The girl had been broken, abandoned by her classmates and

friends. Her expected victory had been flipped on its head, brought crashing down. Amikura had been betrayed, lied to, and left to the side, discarded as no longer worth being a leader.

And now I would save her.

Thank you Ryuuen, for doing my job for me.

"Out of curiosity, were you actually attracted to Ryuuen?"

"I mean, kind of? He's hot, in a delinquent way, and he's got a fucked up mind. It's fun to talk to. I actually did enjoy our dates." That would explain why she was hurt so much, even more than I expected. Ryuuen's insults too had stabbed her.

"And yet you kept yourself together enough to continue to bait him. You've got nothing to be ashamed of. You executed the trap as best you could. Ryuuen was just too smart for it."

"Aha, yeah he's not an idiot. I probably should have expected him to pull something like this."

"You'll know for next time then," I concluded.

"Right! Now, let's go win a sports festival!" There was a lot of energy in her voice, but even Amikura must have known the current situation. Class A was situated to come dead last, and Class C would be trying even harder now.

Even so, her regained enthusiasm didn't drop even the slightest as she smiled and turned back to her class.

Authors Notes:

Ryuuen used uno reverse card. It was super effective

Been a while since I could write some Kushida fluff stuff, so that was fun. Ayanokouji preying on the beaten Amikura only works if Ichinose doesn't mention anything. Will she? Won't she? Will she tell part of the story, will she explain anything at all? Who the fuck knows.

Out of curiosity, how would Kanzaki's name be split up to emphasise all the sylabuls like Amikura did. Specifically, the n. I only did a couple of years of Japanese early in middle school, but would it be split ka-n-za-ku or kan-za-ku. I went with the latter in this chapter.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 10 - Festival Part 5

"Kiyotaka-kun, we have a problem."

Our lunch break was almost over when I heard these words. The afternoon period was shorter than the morning, but the events were worth a lot more. The tug-of-war, scavenger hunt, four-way tug-of-war, mix gender three-legged race and finally the 1200m relay were all that was left. The boys also had tug-of-war, and the girls had to play ball toss. These were the biggest events of the day, the most exciting, and the most rewarding when it came to points.

Which is why when Kikyou came up to me to give me a warning, I was understandably on edge.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well, a bunch of our classmates are too sick to participate anymore. They're all running to the toilets with diarrhoea, so they can't really compete in any races," she explained.

We were standing at the Class D tent getting ready for the next event, the tug-of-war. Everyone was supposed to return to their tents now at the end of lunch but as I looked around it became clear that a significant number of students were missing.

A concerning thought appeared in my mind. "How many of them have been socialising with Class C."

Kikyou was confused only for a moment, before shock appeared in her eyes. "That's right! Everyone thought Class C was being more friendly now, but they just showed it was all a plan didn't they. Thinking about it... a lot of people in our class were making new friends, but for the sick people... I think most of them were eating lunch with Class C today!"

"Poison then. Fast acting laxatives, probably in a drink they brought. Easy enough to purchase from the chemist here, and not very suspicious," I summised. It was a very likely possibility.

"Wait, but that means we're going to struggle for some events. Without all of those people, we don't have a chance!" Kikyou exclaimed.

I looked around the tent. Assuming everyone who would be participating was back now, we were missing 16 people. Ten boys and six girls. Unsurprisingly with the general nature of Class C, more boys were able to get along than girls, although that wasn't very relevant right now.

There were several events where the entire class would participate coming up. Capture-the-flag, the boy's tug-of-war and the girls ball toss would be much harder, down a significant number of students.

There was some hope though. We would most likely lose most of these events, but if we suffered no more injuries the recommended events would still be fine. There were a few people missing, but for the important events, the only person missing was Horikita.

"Horikita wouldn't have been friends with Class C though," I noticed. She was the odd one out of the missing students.

"No, you're right," Kikyou muttered in agreement. "Horikita must be missing for another reason."

"Let's hope she gets back before the 1200m relay. Other than that, we just need to get through the first few events.

"Hey, but is there no way to prove that Class C did something?" Kikyou asked. According to the foul play rules, they could be disqualified for this. Baiting us in with friendship and then knocking us down with laxatives was certainly a punishable offence.

"If you can find any evidence, go ahead and complain. But they most likely shared drinks and pretended to drink themselves. By now, any evidence would have been flushed down a drain. Class C wins this time."

"Aha, once again Kiyotaka-kun is right. We'll just have to do our best and fight on."

"Kushida-san, Ayanokouji, please pay attention." Hirata called us over to where he was trying to give the class a speech. We stopped talking by ourselves and came over to join the group.

"I know it's been a tough day. We've all done our best despite the problems we faced. Our participation table was changed, and our allies were betrayed. And now, lots of us are retiring sick. I'm sure we all have our own opinions on the situation, but it doesn't matter. Our other leader, Horikita, is gone, and no one knows where she is. Right now, we are alone and weak. But that doesn't mean we are going to give up. We're going to get through this day together!"

Not once did Hirata smile at all during his speech. His fists were clenched, fire in his eyes. But it did the job, and the remnants of our class were fired up.

"Yeah, like Hirata-kun said, we've got this!" Kikyou jumped onto the bandwagon, giving a cheer and a jump, boosting the morale of the class from determination to excitement. As expected of the classroom sweetheart, she could always improve a situation. No one could say she was sitting out or playing favourites anymore.

Now that the speech was done, Hirata let everyone break off to

prepare for the afternoon session, filling up water bottles or going to stretch. Kikyou returned to my side, muttering "we're completely fucked." Clearly she hadn't believed a word of her support.

"A suggestion. Looking over at Class A they've also been hit hard by Class C." It was understandable, since they were always open to making friend. "The results don't affect how many points the winning class gets. If you're going to lose, just give up and take the loss," I suggested.

"Most people won't like such a cowardly idea," Kikyou reminded me.

"There's no point fighting inevitability. Use the chance to rest and let the opponents tire themselves out. Save our energy for the events that matter later on."

"I'll suggest it, but I don't think anyone will want to go along with it."

"It doesn't matter much either way. Good luck." The class began to split off, the girls going to ball toss and the boys to tug of war.

"Yeah, like luck will help us against an extra 14 students," Kikyou groaned.

I headed off with the boys to the tug-of-war. Our class was missing ten boys, and Class A was missing four. A fourteen-student difference would certainly make it almost impossible to win. Luckily, none of our stongest people were gone, but sheer numbers would overwhelm us eventually.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Class A and D. You're looking a little worse for wear kukuku." Ryuuen had been waiting for us and didn't hesitate to point out our missing members.

"You'll pay for this Ryuuen," Kanzaki growled.

"Huh? No, I got paid. Besides, they just got a bit of a tummy bug. My class had nothing to do with it." He was clearly taking great delight in teasing Kanzaki and Hirata.

"You're a disgrace, Ryuuen. Such behaviour is disgusting. I'll make sure that you're punished for this." Hirata was borderline yelling at him. It was taking considerable willpower to hold himself back.

"Kukuku prove it then. You don't have any evidence, do you? So, hurry up and get beaten at tug-of war."

Ryuuen sauntered away back to the side of the White Team. In the beginning the situation had looked bleak, but I had thought we could hold our own. Now, with the two most athletic classes against us, and missing fourteen people, it didn't feel realistic at all.

Dubiously, the Class A and D students lined up as we had prepared, from shortest to tallest. The opponents did nothing of the sort, lining up by class.

"Oi, are they not even trying?" Sudou was baffled at their strategy.

"Ah, it's rather simple, red-kun. They are expressing their disrespect for us. We are not even worth their best efforts. Ah, truly a worthless event. I don't see why we should even bother." Kouenji had come along to join in, but with our looming loss his interest was waning quickly.

"Let's see how we go in the first round. If it's a complete loss, then we give up," I suggested.

"I hate to agree with you, Ayanokouji, but I don't really see a point in trying. We don't have great odds of winning," Kanzaki gloomily admitted.

"What the hell? We aren't giving up, dipshits! Let's win this!" Sudou exclaimed, not willing to lose from the start.

Sighing, I picked up the rope. I was only a few people from the end, and Kouenji had bullied his way into being the anchor. This was the best possible setup we could have for a tug of war.

The referee blew their whistle, and immediately there was a strong force pulling against the rope. Both classes dropped down to strengthen their grip and shift their center of gravity backwards. I could feel the strain on the rope as both teams pulled with an immense force, neither willing to back down.

For a long time both sides were holding equal. The rope hadn't shifted from the center, and despite the missing numbers our superior setup was able to make up for the deficit.

All around me I could hear grunts and groans as everyone put their best efforts in. Everyone was straining themselves, including me, just to hold the line in place. The fact that the center line hadn't moved yet was a testament to our efforts. If we hadn't lost fourteen class members, we most likely would have won this event.

That was, until Ijuin near the front lost his footing and fell backwards, before beginning to slip. Even though the amount of power he brough was small, it was enough to shift the momentum back towards the White Team.

We all dug our heels in and pulled as hard as possible, but with that first shift, the rope ever so slowly began to make its way away from our side, until eventually the center crossed into the opponent's territory.

The referee blew the whistle again to signal the end of the game, and everyone dropped the rope in exhaustion.

The White Team were celebrating their victory, laughing and cheering, while the Red Team tried to rest. The difference in the level of exhaustion were obvious between our teams. The White Team hadn't even been trying their best.

"I guess we really can't beat them with this deficit." The mood of the Red Team was steadily dropping. But there was one person who wasn't worried.

"Don't worry guys. We can't win the game, but we can definitely get back at them," Miyake said with a feral grin. He was one of our stronger participants, so I was curious to hear what he had planned.

After a very short confirmation, everyone agreed to his plan, even Hirata reluctantly. We didn't have a very good chance of winning, especially now that our opponents were rearranging themselves properly for optimal strength. The next round would be our last, losing two to zero to the White Team, but Miyake and the rest of us weren't willing to go down without a fight.

Getting into position, the referee blew the whistle, and once again everyone dropped into position. This time though, we weren't taking any risks trying to pull the rope. Instead, we were only trying to hold it in place, a much easier task. Even against the improved strength of our opponents, the center line didn't move.

Finally, the moment we had been waiting for came. Miyake, positioned in the middle of the rope, shouted out 'now!' Instantly, everyone on our team let go of the rope.

The White Team hadn't been expecting such a tactic. The force they had been putting in was immense, and the sudden lack of resistance resulted in all of them falling backwards at awkward angles, landing on top of each other. There were a lot of pained noises, and we watched as White Team members slowly picked themselves up, groaning in pain. Hopefully the injuries would put a hamper on their upcoming events.

Some of them tried to complain, but aside from our actions being not very sportsmanlike, there was nothing in the rules that stated we couldn't do such a thing.

This time, it was the Red Team who was laughing and cheering. We may have lost the event, and the White Team had gotten 500 points, but that was an inevitable outcome. Hopefully we could make up for this in the recommended events, and our seniors wouldn't lose as badly as us.

Nagumo would probably bribe his year to let him win anyway.

We walked away from the tug-of-war, most of us in high spirits despite the loss. It had been expected but was still major damage to our class's chances. I took solace in the fact that Class A was also losing along with us. Knowing their participation table, it was clear they would have to pay for a few replacements in the recommended events, not an inexpensive problem.

We returned to our tent at the same time as the girls came truding back from the ball toss. Based on their dejected appearance,

they didn't appear to have won either.

"You too, huh?" I commented as Kikyou approached me, a downcast look on her face.

"It wasn't even close. We got completely run around by their extra numbers. Even if I hadn't suggested it, we probably would have given up early anyway."

So, the girls did end up taking a loss. Right now, it was a deadly situation. Too much more and we could end up tipping the balance.

"We'll just have to pick it up in the rest of the events. You've still got those spare points I gave you, right?"

"Mhm! I can pay for any substitutions we need. I mean, it's only expected that the kindest girl in class would make such a sacrifice," Kikyou explained with a devious grin. At the start of this morning, I had sent her several hundred thousand points just in case of a situation like this. It was much more effective to have Kikyou paying the penalty than for me to.

"Ayanokouji, what do you think of our situation?" Hirata had come over and joined in my meeting with Kikyou.

"I think we're well positioned to take a decent place," I confidently answered.

"You mean it doesn't matter that we're missing so many people?"

"Yeah. Besides from capture the flag everything else is recommended. Class C executed their plan too late in the day to do any major damage," I explained. The 1000 point loss was already heavy, but hopefully we could stem the bleeding there.

"I see. Do you think that Kouenji-kun would be willing to participate in the scavenger hunt? We need to replace Okitani-kun," Hirata explained.

"No, it would be best not to bother him. He understands the situation, and if he wanted to participate, he would. Find someone else," I said. Kouenji would participate, when necessary, but such a luck-based event didn't interest him.

"Fine, I'll trust you at least when it comes to managing Kouenji-kun. Do you have any idea where Horikita-san is?"

"Eto, I saw her going towards the school at some point, but I don't know any more," Kikyou interjected. I shook my head as well. I didn't know any more than Kikyou.

"Well, I guess that's something, Kushida-san. Make sure to win the scavenger hunt. We can't suffer any more losses," Hirata ordered. It was harsh, since it really was based on how lucky you were.

In response, I headed down towards the start for the scavager hunt, while Kikyou began to explain that she was happy to pay for substitutes, having won the Dragon Group on the cruise ship. I was running in the first group, and when I arrived, it became clear just

how stacked it was.

Ryuuen, Hashimoto and Shibata were standing there, all ready to compete. This would be the race to watch.

"Well, I'm looking forward to compete one on one with you boss. It's been a while, hasn't it?" Hashimoto said with a grin.

"Hashimoto."

"Ah, that's no way to talk to a fellow partner in crime. And this time we don't have the wet blanket Kamuro to bother us hahaha!"

Ryuuen grinned. "Get ready to be crushed, monster. Even you can't have perfect luck."

"At this point I'll believe anything," muttered Shibata. He was still rather unhappy due to the revelation at lunch about Amikura.

"Oh, is Shibata-kun still upset? Don't worry, I'll protect you from the big bad Ryuuen and his magical plague class."

Before the situation could degrade any further, the referees explained the competition before it started. "Some items in the scavenger hunt are quite difficult to procure. To pick a new item, you can request a redraw, but there will be a thirty-second waiting period. You must make your redraw request to the referee when you draw your lot during the competition. The game ends when three players reach the goal. That's all."

It wasn't long before we were given the signal to start the race. Running forwards, I pulled a piece of paper out of the box, alongside Ryuuen, Hashimoto and Shibata.

The three ran off upon reading their paper, but I froze for a moment.

'Ten Friends'

That was impossible for me. There were people who got along with me, but I could only count one person as an actual friend.

"I'd like to request a change."

In accordance with the rules, I waited for thirty seconds, before drawing out a second piece of paper.

'Someone you love'

If I wanted to win, I would have to lie.

I could hear my classmates shouting at me to hurry up, and so I took off running, sprinting right at them. Some of them seemed shocked, until I ran right up to Kikyou and quickly swept her off her feet and carried her off.

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun, what's going on?!"

While I ran, I held out the piece of paper so she could read it. "Just go along with it if you want me to win."

I could see Hashimoto already on his way back with a shoe from a classmate, and so I picked up the pace, running as fast as possible, holding Kikyou close to my chest in my arms. I didn't miss how red

her face had gotten as I held her.

All around me I could hear cheers and wolf-whistles as I carried Kikyou in a princess hold, stealing her away from the class. I was sure people wouldn't let me forget this.

I reached the tent just before Hashimoto and handed the referee my piece of paper. It was an embarrassing situation, but luckily, they didn't question it, instead handing me back the paper and declared me the winner of the race.

In the end, Shibata came in third, and Ryuuen lost the race, although after his performance in the last team events it wasn't something to be worried about.

I walked back to the team tent, alongside a still completely red Kikyou, only to be greeted by claps and cheers.

"Oi, go on Ayanokouji, what was on the paper?" Sudou called. I could see from everyone around him that the entire class was curious to know.

"Your best friend," I lied. The paper said someone you loved, but there wasn't anyone like that for me. So, I chose Kikyou as the person most likely to understand. Showing that to a girl was as close to a confession as you could get, but if I was going to win the event that was a necessary price to pay.

"Eh? You really swept her in your arms there, Ayanokouji-kun. Like a prince saving his princess from her tower, how romantic," Karuizawa teased.

"S-stop it Karuizawa-san, it's not like that," Kikyou protested.

"It was just the fastest way to get back," I explained.

"Mhm, sure, totally believe you," Karuizawa sarcastically replied. Slowly though, the excitement was dying out, and since the next scavenger hunt was about to begin and the class turned their attention there.

Without anyone noticing, Kikyou somehow managed to drag me to the side and out of the way of the rest of the class. Her face was still just as red as when I picked her up.

"Kiyotaka... about that paper..." She was hesitating much more than usual, extremely embaressed.

"It was a convenient lie to win the race. That's it," I assured her.

"Oh... right..." That answer seemed to disappoint her more than I had thought, but a moment later the bubbly class friend had returned. "Let's go cheer on our classmates, right?"

"Mm. It would be good to pick up a few more points here."

After the six races were run in the scavenger hunt, Class D had managed to miraculously pick up three victories, thanks in part to Onodera and Miyake having good luck with their draws.

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The next event we had was the four-way tug of war. Out of all the recommended events, this was the one I had the most confidence in. Four students were nominated from each class, as opposed to the entire class event. This was a good chance to pick up 500 points from a team event.

In the end, the Class D lineup hadn't been hard to decide on. Kouenji, Sudo, Hirata and I had the highest grip strength, and although Hirata's position had been offered to Miyake, the latter declined it, citing a sore knee from the pervious tug-of-war.

Our opponents weren't going to be a pushover, but I had complete confidence in our ability to out-tug them.

Out of everyone, I was most concerned about Class C. Class B was fronting some strong students, but Yamada was most certainly the biggest threat. Luckily, Class C was on an angle to us, and so we wouldn't have to fight the full force of their pull. Our opponents were Class B.

"Right, let's show them that Class D isn't a pushover! We'll make them pay for the last tug of war!" Sudou shouted.

"I must admit, I'm fairly confident about our chances here," Hirata said. "We held on well in the previous bout, and now the numbers are event we should be able to do well."

"Ha! Of course we shall win this event. You have the power of a perfect existence assisting you, losing is a foreign concept."

"Didn't we lose the last one with your help, Kouenji?" Sudou dubiously asked, only to be ignored by the golden-haired boy.

There was no banter this time, only the concentration of four teams ready to give their all. With Class C's recent comeback, it was once again anyone's game. Unfortunately, Ryuuen had made his move too late. There weren't enough competitions left for him to win.

The referee gave the start signal, and the four of us began to pull. Unlike in the previous tug-of-war, there was a lot less resistance, and the rope slowly but surely began to move in our direction. With the full force of Kouenji, Sudou, Hirata and myself, we quickly pulled the center of the rope across to our side, claiming victory for Class D. This was one of the events I had been confident in winning, and after our string of defeats at the hands of the white team, it was a good morale boost for the class to see such a quick victory.

"Man, you guys really are insane. How did so many strong people end up in Class D?" Hashimoto wondered.

"Because they've all got fucked up attitudes, all four of them. You'd never guess it, but they're all insane," Ryuuen commented. Personally, I thought temperament was the biggest deciding factor in which class a student was placed.

"You aren't wrong there. But still, you'd think someone like Ayanokouji would at least be in Class C," Kanzaki thought aloud. "Say what you want about his attitude, he's definitely smart enough and athletic enough to be placed that high."

"Kukuku spare me your delusions of having a chance with him in his class. Really, someone as fucked up as him isn't going anywhere." Ryuuen had his firm opinion that my mental state kept me in Class D.

"Actually, I scored fifty in the entrance exam," I admitted. "That was probably why I was rated so lowly."

Kanzaki narrowed his eyes at me. "We never got our results back. You could only know that if you did it on purpose. You purposefully scored exactly 50?" So he noticed my slipup.

I shrugged. "Everyone has to impress the interviewers somehow." Deciding that was enough, I turned and began to walk back to the Class D tent, soon followed by Sudou and Hirata. Kouenji had once again pulled his disappearing act.

Before we could reach it however, Hirata put his hand on my shoulder and spun me around stopping us.

"Ayanokouji. I need to know the name of the traitor. If you really have discovered it, please tell me," he asked once again.

"Wait, Ayanokouji you know who the traitor is? Come on tell us! Don't hold back we need to teach them a lesson!" Sudou exclaimed.

But I picked up on the small dart in Hirata's eyes to Sudou as he first spoke. This wasn't for me. Hirata already knew my stance. This entire situation had been developed to involve Sudou, perhaps to add pressure on me to divulge what I knew, or to confirm whether I had figured it out.

"Sorry, but I won't be telling you who changed our participation table. I already owe them a favour." Hirata's face tightened at my words very slightly, but it was Sudou who gave the biggest reaction.

"Augh, they're gonna get away with it! Hey, it wasn't you right, Ayanokouji? I bet you're pretty happy with how the day went!"

"How could I owe a favour to myself Sudou?" I reasoned.

"I mean... I guess that's true. But still!" I managed to confuse him enough.

"Don't bother me with this again Hirata. We're doing well enough that it's not worth worrying over."

I turned and walked away from them, returning to my hammock that I had hidden in the branches of the tree. I had hoped to get some rest before the next event, capture the flag, but it wasn't long before I was interrupted.

"You seem fairly relaxed for someone in a losing position, Ayanokouji."

Manabu and Tachibana had come over to talk to me.

"I'm not worried. You and Nagumo have been pulling your weight for the red team." I had been watching all the year levels today to some degree, just to keep an eye on the potentially changing situation. Luckily, it had all gone as expected.

"Is that enough to make up for your loss of fourteen people?" Manabu questioned.

"You're paying very close attention to us," I noted

"On the contrary, I pay attention to everyone." As expected, Manabu had a counter to everything.

"What is it you wanted to talk about," I sighed.

"How dare you speak to the president in such a manner, and after he is giving up his personal time for you as well?!" Tachibana exclaimed. At this point, I was sure she would realise I wasn't going to change, nor would Manabu care.

"It's fine. I was curious if you had any plans to rectify the situation you're in. Won't you be claiming unsportsmanlike conduct?" He asked.

"Please. You and I are both aware I have no grounds to do so." Manabu should understand that Ryuuen wouldn't have left any evidence.

"Indeed. And yet you aren't panicking."

"There's no reason to. Ryuuen acted far too late. There's still time to win the recommended events. Don't' worry, we won't be costing the red team their win," I assured him.

"While that's a relief to hear, that wasn't what I wanted to talk about."

Oh? As pertains to our class there would only be a few reasons Manabu would care, beyond acting his role as student council president. I had explained them all, all except for one.

"Why was my sister crying near the nurse's office?" Manabu demanded.

"She was crying?" I wondered. That wasn't like Horikita at all. I had expected her to be bottling up her emotions entirely.

"Not much, but she was certainly experiencing a troubling situation," he explained further.

"If you've been watching my class then you should already understand. Besides, I didn't think you cared. Didn't you want her to drop out?" it was a curious position Manabu had taken.

"While professionally I believe she should leave the school, as a brother I can't help but care. From a distance of course, but nevertheless, I am troubled by what's bothering her."

I sighed. "There's nothing you nor I can do at this point. She failed the test to stop any traitors, and so she got what was coming.

Now she has to face the consequences."

"That's rather cruel. As a classmate, shouldn't you put more effort into protecting a higher value commodity. To your mind at least, despite her flaws, Suzune is certainly a valuable resource."

"Tomorrow is a hope, not a promise," I explained. "She needed to learn that there is no such thing as inevitability. At any point her world can crash down. It's a lesson she refuses to learn."

Manabu straightened up. "Very well. I'll leave you to your rest, before capture the flag. Take care not to cause problems for the Red Team. We still hold the lead, but only by a thousand or so points. Too many losses will cause problems."

With this warning, Manabu took his leave, Tachibana scurrying along behind him.

There were only a few more events left for today. Would it be enough to bring our class back from defeat?

Authors Notes:

Almost forgot to update today, but remembered right before going to bed.

Ryuuen is having a really good time, things are going well for him. Good to see he isn't constantly getting fucked over in this fic. Had some fun with the scavenger hunt, kept true to canon just because it's way to funny.

Horikita crying? Yes, in her current state I think she might be on the verge of a breakdown here, so not quite crying, but something an older brother would be perceptible to (spoken as an older brother to a younger sister).

And yes, even the godlike strength of Ayanokouji can't make up for such a big deficit in tug of war.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 11 - Festival Part 6

Class D was fired up.

Our allies, Class A, were suffering an internal combustion, and had been languishing the entire day, but we were beyond the point of worrying about them.

The boy's victory at the four-way tug of war, along with our success in the scavenger hunt, had brought morale back up, and everyone was ready for capture the flag.

After this, only two events would remain for the first years, and then the day would end. Only three chances to make a comeback, and I intended to win every one of them.

The entirety of Class D headed over to the capture the flag arena, even the girls, most of us bouncing around excitedly. Even with our missing members, there was an air of excitement, and it was hard to find a classmate without a smile.

In the end, it was a sports festival, and people had had fun. It wasn't just a competition for Class Points, but a day out on the field to compete purely athletically. Even for the most physically incapable students, it was something different from the norm.

The girls followed along with us, intending to line the side and cheer. They had finished their events for the day, and although they hadn't won anything, it didn't mean they were going to just relax and not care anymore. We had our own personal cheerleader Kikyou, and I could see plenty of boys' enthusiasm being boosted by the constant compliments from her and the other girls.

Class A was a different matter.

They trudged over wearily, tired of the day. Nothing had gone right for them, and like us, they had lost significant numbers to Ryuuen's ploy. Their leader had been exposed as a traitor. It was hard to find any good in their day.

And it was with reluctance that Kanzaki walked over to Hirata to come up with a strategy for Capture the Flag.

"We're here, but don't expect great things," Kanzaki frankly stated. Clearly, he had no hope of winning, which was fair enough viewing the uneven odds before us. In his mind, this would be a repeat of the tug-of-war.

"Let's just do our best. The odds aren't in our favour, but I'm not going to give up," Hirata stated.

"We aren't either, but it's true that we're lacking in motivation. I don't know, Hirata-kun. I could understand if you want to give up." There was a noticeable depression in Kanzaki's voice

"Haa, don't worry about it, Kanzaki-kun. Class D will do their best to win, even if we don't have great chances." Sighing, Hirata turned to face me, where I had been standing somewhat off to the side listening in. "Ayanokouji, as loath as I am to ask you, do you have any ideas?"

"Put everyone on defence," I suggested.

"What?"

"Protect our flag, both Class A and D. Do that and we can win."

"Ayanokouji, there's no time limit on the game. And even if we all defend, we're down too many people. The numbers alone are too much for us," Kanzaki protested.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get the flag," I explained. "Defend ours for long enough, and I'll make sure we win."

Shocked faces stared back at me. Finally, Shibata was the one to speak.

"I know you're good Ayanokouji, but even you can't take on a class alone. They'll probably have one defend and one attack. I don't think you can get through everyone."

"Oh, I won't be alone." Turning, I spoke to the person flirting with a girl from 2-B who had come over to watch. A crowd had been growing even with upperclassmen here to see us compete. "Kouenji. Do you think you can get their flag before I can?"

"Ha, I can never resist a challenge from you, Ayanokouji-boy. Very well, I shall fight back against the injustice done to the lovely women of our class!"

With Kouenji's support, I was confident this would be an equal match.

"Do you have any better ideas?" I proposed to Hirata, Kanzaki and Shibata.

"Fine, we'll try this. I don't really see any other plan that can work," Kanzaki rationalised. "Hirata, you take the lead."

Hirata didn't waste a moment, calling in both classes and explaining the plan. There were a lot of dubious looks, but when even Sudou wasn't complaining, the two classes went with it.

Today, Kouenji and I were the heroes of Class D, and there wasn't anyone willing to argue back against us at this point. Class A was willing to make a hail mary play, to hope for a miracle.

We entered the field of play as a united unit, ready to defend our flag from the White Team or die trying. It was certainly a terrifying opponent, even more so than in the tug of war. At least before they had been lined up and out of sight. With the entirety of Class B and

C ready to oppose us, for a moment I was worried about whether we could win.

The referee blew their whistle, and the entirety of Class C, all 19 students charged at us. Apparently, they had been assigned as the offensive team, leaving Class B in the defensive.

As planned, both classes gathered together and did their best to hold off the oncoming slaughter, doing their best to slow them down. We had the extra numbers, and with three people holding onto Alberts legs, so far Class C hadn't been able to make any progress.

My eyes met Kouenji's and with a smirk he ran off heading directly for the opponent's flag. Not willing to be beaten, I took off as well, heading directly for the opposite side of the defence as Kouenji was.

A few of them split off, coming forward to stop me, but it wasn't hard to dodge their grabs, spinning around and moving past them. Hashimoto stepped up to me, ready to grab me, but I easily stepped him, leaving him with metaphorically broken ankles.

Off to the side, out of the corner of my eye I could see Kouenji facing the same problems, a small trail of students left behind him, chasing him as he ran forward, but unable to grab him.

There were only a few opponents in front of me now, and with some effort I forced my way through. One of them dived and grabbed my ankle, to which I responded with a kick to the face, freeing my foot as a result of his pain.

With no one left in my way, I ran forward and claimed the flag, winning the first round for the Red Team.

Looking over to our defence, it was clear that they had been getting closer to breaking through, but the combination of Class A and D had held up quite well.

Looking over to Kouenji, I could see a pleased look on his face as he walked over to me, not at all bothered by the five students refusing to let go of him.

"A rather effective strategy, demon-boy. If only you had had to face as many of these knaves as I have. Truly filthy beings." He grabbed a boy holding onto his arm and carelessly threw him away.

As we spoke Class C had returned to their defence.

"You guys really are unstoppable kukuku." Ryuuen, despite his failure to grab the flag was in high spirits, deservedly so.

"I'm curious as to how many people it takes to stop us. Do you care to find out?" I asked.

Ryuuen just laughed and told us to leave, while the referees came onto the field to resecure the flag in place.

Kouenji and I were received with a cheer as we got back to the

Red Team.

"You two're fucking insane, charging that many. Bring me this time!" Sudou called. I glanced at Kouenji and came to an understanding.

"Sure, why not. We'll have to be quick so they don't overwhelm our defence though," I agreed. Sudou would be valuable to have along with us.

"Yes! Right, I'm gonna get the flag myself this time!" I was a little confused at his enthusiasm but looking at the crowd it made sense. Horikita had returned.

"How did you even think such a dumb plan would work?" Kanzaki asked me.

"Actually, it was Amikura's idea. She told me to 'run at them like a fucking maniac and barge through' I think."

There was some grumbling in the Class A group at the mention of Amikura's name, but no one could argue with the results.

We got back into position, and the referee blew the whistle. And as planned, Kouenji and I didn't move. Neither did anyone from the White Team. The only person to move was Sudou running forward yelling like a maniac, before colliding with the White Team and taking down four people with him. Soon enough, they piled on, with almost ten students being needed to hold him down.

"Hey, aren't you two gonna do anything?" Hirata asked angrily.

"Relax, angry-boy. We knew that they wouldn't run at us, instead changing tactics."

"Yes, Sudou was a valuable sacrifice to cut down their numbers. If he hadn't done so, we wouldn't have a chance at winning. Keep everyone here to defend just in case."

Saying this, Kouenji and I launched our own attack, following the same plan as last time.

It was a simple calculation we had both made. Ryuuen was the de facto leader of the White Team in this event, and he would recognise the inevitability of a frontal assault. Kouenji and I could beat his defenders before his team could win, no matter how it was arranged. And so, he had ordered everyone to stay back and defend. Even with our strength and skill, there was no way for the two of us to get through fourty students.

Eventually though, someone from the Red Team, without the tyrant leadership of Ryuuen, would get antsy and make a break for their flag, disrupting the Red Teams defence. He could exploit that and win.

To whittle down their numbers, Kouenji and I had sent Sudou on a suicide mission, knowing it would take numerous people to hold him down, something that would have to be continuously done.

With their numbers down considerably, it was the time to strike.

This time though, I didn't split up and target a different side. Speeding in front of Kouenji I launched myself at the students in front of us. Since all sides of the flag had to be defended, we weren't up against their full strength, and I managed to clear the way for Kouenji to power through, being dragged down by several students, not stopping as I forced my way forwards like a battering ram.

Given the gap, Kouenji took the opportunity and made a break for it, sneaking through the grabbing hands and reaching the flag the White Team had to defend.

A three-man operation had managed to defeat the defence of Class B and C, securing the victory for the White Team.

The game was a best of three, and since we had won the first two rounds it was over. Kouenji, holding the white flag began a victory lap, claiming a high five from every girl that was watching.

The entire school had been watching our competition, since nothing else was on, which meant that the gambling addicts in the second year had been setting bets on the match. They couldn't help themselves but emulate bookies, and since gambling wasn't forbidden, almost everyone partook in it in some sense.

And that was why when I told Kikyou to place a bet on a three-man offence winning for the Red Team in two rounds, she had been offered 100 to 1 odds for such a ridiculous suggestion.

Once all was said and done... I didn't think they would have the funds to pay back the 100,000-point bet she placed on those odds. It was aggravating to constantly have to wager points, but due to my low income, it was essential to gather private points in another manner, and in large quantities.

"You really are a fucking monster," Ryuuen complained as he lifted himself off the ground. "Honestly, how the fuck am I supposed to beat you?"

"Good exercise and a healthy diet," I suggested.

"Don't give me that crap," he growled. "The force of two classes and you just break through."

"Force is meaningless without skill. You'll never win head on, Ryuuen," I said, before walking off to talk to Horikita.

The girl in question was standing somewhat off from the crowd. The second years had taken to the field now, and all the attention had returned to them, with Kouenji even eventually, with a lot of persuasion, handing back the flag he captured.

"You never cease to amaze, do you Ayanokouji-kun?" Horikita remarked.

"Where have you been? Hirata's been control of the class while you went walkabout," I explained.

Horikita clenched her fists, her face a mask of pain, anger and frustration.

"I've been dealing with Ryuuen. I assume from the missing students you have been too?" At least she was quick on the uptake.

"Yeah, he's putting up a fight, but at this point I don't think it matters. The results are already set in stone."

"I'm glad to hear that we aren't losing. Did you ever find out who the traitor was?"

I nodded. "Suspiciously easily. It turned out that Amikura gave the participation table to Ryuuen. He said so himself."

"Obviously he was lying," Horikita muttered. It was good to see that she was quick to understand. "But about our class- "

"You'll have to find someone else to answer that question Horikita. Although, you've been labelled as a deserter now, so I'm not sure who will want to answer, at least not without you explaining your absence, which I assume has to do with Kinoshita." She seemed shocked at me figuring it out, but really it had been an obvious conclusion. "I need to prepare for the three-legged race."

Saying this, I left the girl behind to try and repair her fractured position in the class. Hirata hadn't wasted time making it clear that Horikita had disappeared.

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The time had come for the mix-gender three-legged race, the second last event of the day. By now, every year level had caught up with their team events, and so now every eye would be on our race, watching, hoping, betting on who would be the winner.

Kikyou and I, as the nominated representatives of Class D made our way down to the starting line, the cheers of support from the class coming from behind us.

"They've got no idea that we've been practicing, do they?" Kikyou asked with a smirk.

"To be honest, I've got no idea what the class is thinking," I admitted. "That's your department."

"True. But no, it's pretty evenly split on whether we'll do well. Some people think that because you're running it'll be an easy win, the rest think since we've never run together before this afternoon that we can't coordinate at all." A bright smile accompanied her next words. "I can't wait to prove them wrong and win this!"

What Kikyou had been alluding to were the few practices we had had behind the team tent. In preparation for the run, we had taken the time to get some advice from people, since officially we hadn't even done a three-legged race before and weren't supposed to on our original participation table.

That situation had led us to going for a few short runs, in which I

was purposefully keeping out of sync with Kikyou just to make life interesting. From the looks on the faces of people watching, they seemed to lose hope of winning the event from our failures.

Even so, I refused to allow anyone to pay points for a replacement. It could only be done if there was someone missing.

"You really enjoy torturing people, don't you? Making them think we're going to lose. Ne, you need to lighten up a bit, Kiyotaka-kun."

We lined up for the race, and the referee handed Kikyou a strap of cloth to use.

"Ah, I expected you to be here Ayanokouji. And Kikyou-chan as well."

I turned slightly to see the person greeting us. Shibata and Ichnose had shown up as the representatives of Class A, although neither of them looked particularly happy. Ichinose in particular was looking to be on the verge of a breakdown.

"To be honest I'm surprised to see you here Ichinose. I didn't think were the fastest runner in your class," I noted. I wasn't trying to be malicious, but she flinched away from my voice nevertheless.

"I may not be the fastest runner, but this event is about coordination. When we practiced, Shibata and I were the fastest pair in our class."

"Aha, I watched you practice once, Ichinose-san and Shibata-kun. The two of you were incredible! I could feel my heart pounding," Kikyou added.

"Eh, it makes me happy to hear you say that Kikyou-chan. But I'm sure you and Ayanokouji are going to be tough opponents." Shibata scratched his hair in embarrassment at the compliment, although I was sure it was deserved.

"We certainly won't go easy on you Shibata-kun! Try and keep up with us~" Kikyou teased back.

"Yeah, we'll do our best. But I'm a bit scared about hearing the results. I really though Class A had a chance. I didn't expect a traitor at all," Shibata admitted.

"It's really scary, isn't it? I thought I could trust everyone in my class, we were all friends, but now, I'm just not sure." Kikyou had a downcast, almost scared expression on her face at the thought of an internal betrayal.

"It's certainly rough, Kikyou-chan. I'd like to think that everyone in my class is trustworthy, but to see Amikura-san make a mistake like that, it hurts. Even if she didn't mean it," Shibata bemoaned.

"You were close to Amikura, weren't you Ichinose? What do you think about all this?" I probed. But I didn't get what I had expected. There was no anger in Ichinose's eyes, only melancholy, bitterness and defeat. She had given up for today. I was sure she wouldn't let

it go, but in this instance, she had accepted my victory.

"I never thought she'd do something like this," Ichinose grudgingly said.

There was an awkward tone in the air for a moment before Shibata tried to clear it up.

"Well, I'm looking forward to- "

Shibata was cut off by the referee calling us to the starting line. Due to our class ranking, Class A and D were at opposite ends to each other, and he didn't have a chance to finish his conversation.

"This feels right, somehow," Kikyou said as we lined up.

"What do you mean?"

"You and me, leading the charge for our class. Together, we can't lose," she explained.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and prepared to support her weight as I ran.

"You've got a pretty high opinion of yourself. I would be fine without you," I argued back. It wasn't true, but I wanted to see how she responded.

"No, you'd have no hope. Well, maybe you'd do okay," Kikyou acquiesced, "but Ayanokouji can't find things out like I can. If not for me, who would you turn to. Karuizawa? I'm worth much more than her."

That was true. Comparing the two of them, their reach and connection with students, Kikyou was infinitely more valuable. Karuizawa had her role to play, and I wouldn't give her up easily, but between the two, I would much rather have Kikyou by my side.

"You're right," I said. "I need you and your talents by my side. You're mine, and together we can't lose."

A gorgeous beaming smile was displayed as she wrapped her arms around my chest.

"Then let's win this race and prove to everyone that we're better than them."

I tilted my head at her. "You know you can't give up on your act, right?"

"Details." She brushed off my concern, although I wasn't really worried. It wasn't something that Kikyou could mentally give up on ever. "Let's prove that there's no one who can stand in our way."

I was a little concerned at how quickly Kikyou had been imprinting herself to my side, but in the grand scheme of things I preferred her there. She was a danger I would have trouble fighting against, if not for my evidence against her, and as my partner Kikyou held immense value. She was very important to me, and at this point I couldn't imagine school life without her.

The referee called ready, and we prepared ourselves to run.

Each class had sent up one pair to represent them, eight runners in total. But they didn't stand a chance. Ryuuen's schemes, Sakayanagi's manipulations, in this moment it held no power. This was a competition of pure ability, and right now Class D would win.

The referee blew the starting position and I leapt forward, holding Kikyou's body slightly above the ground. She did her best to match the stride of her right leg, which she let go limp and follow the movements of mine as best as she could.

It might have looked a bit strange from the sidelines, but at worst it would seem like I was dragging her along, her legs struggling to keep up with my speed. In actuality, Kikyou was taking as many short steps as possible with her left leg, barely scraping the ground as she did so, realistic enough to fool anyone but those paying the closest attention to detail.

I powered forward, easily outstripping our opponents even though I wasn't running at my top speed. No one could run their best in a three-legged race, and so there was no opponent near us as we crossed the finish line in first, setting a new school record in the process. Kouenji and I had been breaking records all day, most of them set by Manabu, and I suspected they would never be broken again. This was just another one, but this time I set it as a pair, with my partner by my side.

Surprisingly, Ichinose and Shibata came in second. They hadn't been lying when they claimed to have impressive synergy, and it was clear now upon viewing the speed they moved. From what I had seen of our training, they probably would have beaten Hirata and Onodera if they had run like originally planned.

"Yay, we won Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyou cheered, giving me a short hug before bouncing off to celebrate with the rest of the class.

Instead of following her back to the crowd, I moved off to the side of the course to where Ichinose and Shibata were catching their breaths.

"Do you mind if we talk for a bit?" I asked.

"Heh... sure. You two really ran quickly. It was almost as if you were doing all the running," Shibata commented. As expected from someone as sporty as him, he had noticed.

"Anything's fair if the school doesn't stop us," I explained.

"It's certainly a strategy for a three-legged race," Ichinose admitted. "Although it's not very sportsmanlike. As expected of you, Ayanokouji."

"Hey, there's no need to be so mean, Ichinose-san. We're all on the same side here. And to be honest, I'm impressed you could run that fast while carrying her."

Was he calling Kikyou fat? In any case I had asked to talk to them

for a reason.

"Aside from that, do you really think that Amikura was the traitor, even unintentionally?" I provoked the question.

Ichinose gave me a glare, but Shibata frowned in concentration.

"It definitely doesn't seem like her. It could have been an accident, I suppose," he considered, but I shook my head.

"No, I'm almost certain that it wasn't Amikura. I spoke to her afterwards and she definitely didn't seem like she was acting," I explained, planting the seed of doubt in Shibata's mind.

"Shibata-kun, let's go. We don't have time to waste talking to Ayanokouji about internal class situations." Seeing my plan, Ichinose did her best to get Shibata away from me before I could do any more damage.

"Hey, if Ayanokouji has his own advice, I'm inclined to listen. It's like you don't trust him at all, Ichinose-san. What's going on?" Shibata questioned.

Realising the box she was in, Ichinose sighed in defeat. "It's nothing. I'm also curious as to what Ayanokouji wants too, but I'd like to rest. Maybe we can talk on the way back to the tents?" she suggested, recovering the situation.

"Fair enough. I'll explain on the way." We began to walk back to the tents. "Your only evidence that it was Amikura came from Ryuuen himself, right? So, what's to say it wasn't someone else? Ryuuen could definitely be lying and Amikura isn't the sort of person who makes mistakes like that. She knew what she was getting into when she pretended to date Ryuuen," I elaborated.

"Yeah, she explained it to the class that it was a sabotage plan. I don't think she could have messed it up that badly," Shibata muttered.

"What that means is there is still a traitor in your class who was working with Ryuuen to discredit Amikura, someone that she upset in some way, and you all helped their plan work. Of course, I don't know as much about your class as you do, so I could be reading too far into it," I finished.

"Of course. It is our class, not yours after all," Ichinose added.

"But do you think it's such a weird idea, Ichinose-san? I'm inclined to agree with Ayanokouji," Shibata said.

A heavy sigh came out of the girl. "Unfortunately, I am too. It seems that there might be another party involved."

"It's a shame that Kanzaki jumped the gun and questioned Amikura in the open. If he hadn't done that, Ryuuen might not have been able to discredit her," I bemoaned.

"Yeah, he really... thanks for your ideas, Ayanokouji, but we'll discuss them as a class," Shibata finished the conversation.

"I understand. I'll see you for the relay," I said before leaving the two to their thoughts.

Authors Notes:

I had some crazy delusions where Kouenji would use Ayanokouji as a springboard in the capture the flag and get launched over the White Team and grab the flag. As fun as it was, it became too ridiculous for this story, although I encourage someone to write a crack fic:

Ayanokouji and Kouenji: Unstoppable Gymnasts

There was a lot of amazing debate on the last chapter. Honestly felt like i read more and thought more there than one of my uni classes last year.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 12 - Festival Part 7

Kouenji, Sudou, Hirata, Miyake, Onodera and myself.

That was the line-up Class 1-D prepared for the 1200m relay. Our best runners, all rested, stretched, and prepared to take the victory for our class. In the mind of my classmates, there was no possibility but victory.

The six of us made our way down to our starting positions, each separated by 200 meters. I was lined up with Sudou and Miyake, on the opposite side of the 400m track. Every class would make three laps in total, but surprisingly enough, the school wasn't staggering starts. Class D was in the inside lane and had a clear advantage in the race over 3-A in the outer. I supposed that this was the school's handicap.

Everyone cheered as our starters made their way to the line, Kouenji clearly enjoying the spotlight. I watched with Sudou and Miyake as he combed his hair, before throwing his comb to some third-year girls in the crowd, who surprisingly began to fight over it.

"Say what you want about his attitude, Kouenji has a sense of flair," Miyake remarked.

"He's annoying, but when he tries, he's impressive," Sudou grudgingly admitted.

"Let's focus on the race. Sudou, you've got to be ready to keep our lead."

"Yeah, yeah, Ayanokouji, don't worry. We don't have a chance of losing."

The starter gun was fired, and Kouenji took off like a bullet. In only one stride he was ahead of the other eleven runners, and after that he didn't slow down. Of course, the fastest runners didn't go first. They were reserved to be the anchors, but that just motivated Kouenji to run even more.

"I can't get over how fast he is. It's crazy."

"Yeah, and I thought I was gonna be the fastest in the class at the start of the year. Shows what I know, huh?" Sudou remarked.

We watched Kouenji round the bend, but I noticed he wasn't running his fastest. While he was easily outstripping his opponents, and an almost 50m gap had appeared, he continually turned to the

crowd, waving and blowing kisses to them.

"Sudou, you better get into position," I warned. In the relay, we had to move onto the track to receive the baton from our teammate, and Kouenji was quickly coming up to our position.

"Oh right. You two better not let the team down!" He said, before lining up. As Kouenji passed him the baton, I couldn't help but feel that the still widening gap would be impossible to lose even if jogged on my turn.

"Your class has certainly had an interesting festival, Ayanokouji."

I turned to find two anchors had come over to talk to me, Nagumo and Manabu. Miyake took the opportunity to sneak away and go get ready for his turn.

"It's been ups and downs, but winning this race will be a good morale boost," I reasoned.

"To think Class 1-D would be in the lead. It's unthinkable. I'm going to be keeping a much closer eye on your class from now on, Ayanokouji," Nagumo warned with a deadly smile.

"Keep meddling in the affairs of my year Nagumo. It doesn't make a difference." Nagumo simply laughed in response.

"It certainly did something. But I must admit I am disappointed in your cohort. I expected more, to be honest"

The rest of the first handoffs happened, with fresh students running from each year, yet Sudou continued to extend our lead even further.

He was a third of the way around his lap.

"I guess this means you lose your bet Nagumo. I don't think you'll be able to win every event now," Manabu commented. Apparently Nagumo made such a bet.

"Ha, I wasn't expecting the so-called narcissist to run. Everyone I asked said he wouldn't participate." So Nagumo had been asking his spies in my year about Kouenji, probably including Ichinose, who would have reported that Kouenji was being uncooperative.

"Then it was a foolish bet. I would expect more from someone who wants to be President."

"It's a shame I won't get to run against Ayanokouji, but I will get the chance to defeat you, President Horikita. Even with this race, my class will still win in overall points. It's the dawn of a new era at this school."

"Do you seriously plan to change this school?" the Manabu asked.

"You're too traditional. And even though you're strict, you're weak. Your rules are too generous, and they stop people from getting expelled. All I'm going to do is help make this school the ultimate meritocracy," said Nagumo."

Somehow, I couldn't help but feel this conversation was for me.

Manabu wanted me to understand Nagumo better, to be able to challenge him. Even so, I found it rather pointless. I already knew enough about Nagumo. No, Manabu was trying to force me to choose a side he wanted, one where I wasn't going to endanger the school.

Miyake had taken off with the baton, and there was only 400 meters left until it would be my turn as the anchor to run. A few seconds later, most of the other runners had gone. It would Onoderas job to bring it to me.

"I am curious, Ayanokouji. Your class, and Class A took quite the beating with illnesses. It doesn't take a genius to notice foul play. Aren't you going to report anything?" Manabu asked.

I shrugged. "There's nothing to report. I'm sure the evidence of such acts is already gone, and besides, I don't particularly care."

"Oh, how cruel of you, Ayanokouji. Letting your classmates be beaten down so harshly, with no compensation." Nagumo was enjoying the turn of conversation.

"Everything that happened was well within my expectations for today. To be honest, I was prepared to deal with much worse situations, so such a simple tactic doesn't matter."

"You see, President Horikita, this is a boy who understands you can't protect everyone. Sacrifices have to be made by the strong. That's the role of the weak in the school I'm going to build," Nagumo said. Surprisingly enough, we had similar ideals, but by nature it was inevitable that we would clash. Nagumo couldn't allow someone like me to challenge his authority and get away with it as I had.

"You misunderstand me Nagumo. There's a line between not making sacrifices and protecting everyone, something the two of you fail to walk. Students here aren't your playthings, and acting like they are will be your downfall," Manabu warned us. "You cannot truly lead until you understand that."

I walked out onto the track to receive my baton. Onodera was sprinting around the track. A massive lead had been accrued by my class, almost an entire person in the relay ahead now. Mostly that was due to our closest competitor from Class 3-A falling over.

Onodera was doing her best, but even so she couldn't run as fast as they boys could. The lead shrunk very slowly, and while we were losing it, it wasn't a problem. The four boys to come before her had given us every advantage.

"Manabu, this situation is beyond even you now. If Nagumo wants to challenge me, then I have no problem responding in kind," I explained to Manabu, not looking at him, but focusing on the quickly approaching girl with the red headband.

"I'm sure we'll see, Ayanokouji," Manabu replied ominously.

"Ayanokouji-kun! Go!" Onodera cried, passing me the baton. The moment it was in my hands, I took off. I'd run this same distance earlier today against Kouenji, but now it was just me, alone, miles ahead of the pack.

The school around me was a roar of sound and colour, impossible to pull apart any individual person as I ran, pushing myself faster and faster than ever before. If I wanted to meet my goal, to finish the race an entire person ahead of second place in a relay, I needed to go faster.

I pumped my legs, running around the bend as quickly as I could, as much power as I had ever used. It was different, running outside in the wind, feeling as though I cut through it. The world moved under my feet as I dashed along. The finish line was in sight, and so were the cheers of my teammates in the relay. Just a few more meters, even faster, don't slow down yet. The last seconds in a race were crucial. Many people slowed down then, seeing the end, knowing they don't have to keep trying.

I crossed the finish line, breaking through the tape amidst a crowd of cheers. All of the first years, even the White Team were cheering for me, happy to see the upperclassmen taken down a notch.

A quick glance to my right showed that the changeover for Nagumo had just happened sometime in the last couple of seconds. Whether I managed to beat him or not I couldn't tell, and probably would never know for sure, but it was a big enough lead that I was satisfied with the efforts of my class.

That quick glance took my concentration off my footwork, and as I tried to slow down, I tripped over myself and tumbled, falling to the ground with all the momentum I had been carrying.

I rolled a few times before coming to a stop, lying on the ground of the track. From a slight tingle in my left leg, it seemed possible I had scraped my knee, but that wasn't a concern.

I slowly picked myself up from the ground, and the moment I was standing I felt a weight being thrown against me, which I quickly reached around to support.

Looking down, I saw Kikyou giving me a hug, who had apparently sprinted over to me, the rest of my classmates making their way over to celebrate.

"What are you doing?" I quietly asked. This was far too much exposure for someone who wanted to be trustworthy from everyone. Such an act as having a favourite would almost certainly alienate some boys from her.

"Marking my territory," she whispered back quietly, before letting

be go and stepping back. "You were so fast, Kiyotaka-kun! That was amazing! We won!"

I looked over to Hirata who was at the back of the crowd celebrating. We had a rocky relationship, where he couldn't argue against my actions or results objectively, but morally I disputed his every belief. No words were said, but he gave me a nod, before turning back with a fake smile of happiness to celebrate with some classmates.

It didn't take long before some people started suggesting a celebration, going to karaoke. I didn't waste any time shutting down that idea. I had no interest in getting too friendly with my classmates. At my refusal, some of them seemed to remember that despite my results this festival, they were supposed to hate me for expelling their friends. It was impressive how conveniently people forgot their grudges when someone was popular.

I saw Nagumo talking to a few of his classmates. He had come second in the end, with Manabu coming third, and as I looked over, he threw me a deadly grin. He may have lost a bet with Manabu, but part of me suspected that he had already expected this result, that the bet was merely to lower Manabu's expectations. It was certainly something Nagumo was crafty enough to come up with.

"Hey, they're announcing the results!" I heard Karuizawa shout.

The results would be announced during the sports festival's closing ceremonies. All the students looked toward the gigantic electronic scoreboard.

"We'll now announce the results of this year's sports festival!"

"Red Team" and "White Team" were displayed as separate entries on the scoreboard. The tallied numbers started to rise, showing the total points the teams had acquired from all thirteen events. The winning team was...

The words "Red Team Wins" appeared on the board along with the team's score. It wasn't an unexpected result, and even with the hiccup of the first years losing members, we still didn't impede our senior's ability to carry the team to victory.

"Next, we will announce each class's overall points."

The board divided the twelve classes into three categories, and it displayed the overall points for each class all at once. We didn't really care about the details of the second- and third-year scores. What was crucial for us was Class D's position"

1st Place: First Year, Class B

2nd Place: First Year, Class D

3rd Place: First Year, Class C

4th Place: First Year, Class A

The results were exactly as I expected.

Despite our comeback late in the day, the deficit accrued from the loss of people, along with Class B consistently doing above average meant they were able to claim the top spot. There were some surprised reactions seeing that since Sakayanagi's plan had been fairly low-key. One would have to consistently pay attention to all the results to notice the slow but steady strategy she employed. Ryuuen's flamboyance also interfered with that.

The biggest surprise to most of the school was Class A coming last. Granted, they weren't the original Class A, but in the second and third years, Class A had come first in both. Seeing them lose was a shock and would certainly lead to a re-evaluation of the difference in strength of the first year classes.

I had no real idea how Ryuuen felt about his classes result. Whether he felt he won anything in this scenario was down to his own goals that no one else understood.

As planned though, Class D had come out on top, being the only class not to lose points. Class B gained 50 for winning but lost 100 for being on the losing White Team. Class A lost 100 for coming last, and Class C lost 50 for third place, plus 100 for their team. In the end, Class D were the only winners today.

Class D cheered loudly as they realised this, and so did Class B. Sakayanagi had a smug look on her face, seeing her plan working so well. It was Class A who were looking the most down. They had known since the start of the day that this was a likely result, but to see all your efforts come to nothing was a crushing feeling.

It wasn't enough to drop them back to Class B, but there was now only a 20-point difference, and after two defeats in a row, morale would be low. Another loss would turn into a superstition.

"Lastly, we will announce the MVP for each school year."

There were only three possible students in the running for that, if you included Sudou, but in the end that too was no surprise. The words *'First year MVP: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka'* appeared on the screen, signifying that I had won. The only event that I had lost was second place to Kouenji in the 100m sprint, and I had participated in all the other events as well.

"A rather obvious result, Ayanokouji-boy, seeing as you competed in far more events than myself. A perfect existence such as myself is more than capable of recognsising that."

"Shut up Kouenji! You're just jealous that Ayanokouji is better than you," Sudou exclaimed, defeding the results.

"Oh? We shall see about that in the future. I'm sure there shall be many more opportunities to test myself against you, demon-boy." Saying this, Kouenji walked off to where a couple of second year girls were waiting for him, leaving the sports festival behind.

"And there he goes with the stupid nickname again. Hey, good work Ayanokouji. I... have my problems with you, I can't deny it, but it was fun doing sports together today." A very mature statement from Sudou before he too began to follow the crowd heading towards the changing room.

Most people had gone by now, but I had an appointment to get to. Before I could however, I was stopped by Horikita.

"Ayanokouji-kun... thank you for your hard work today."

"You're going to have a hard time regaining the classes trust after today," I warned her. "After all your talk about carrying your weight then disappearing. Our class suffered heavy losses, even if the results don't reflect it."

"I know!" she snapped, before taking a deep breath. "I know. I'm fully aware of the situation I'm in, and that it's my fault. I wasn't capable of thinking properly, and I'll suffer the consequences for it."

"As long as you are aware." I thought for a moment, before asking the big question. "Did you ever work out who betrayed our class?" I asked.

"I did," she admitted, sadness and disappointment on her face. "It was obvious from the beginning, but I just didn't want to believe it."

"I'm impressed. You can't hide from this, Horikita. This person put a target on you. Deal with it, or you will lose."

"I know. But I suppose, first of all, I have to get down on my knees."

"On your knees?"

Horikita didn't answer, turning and walking towards the hall. Shrugging, I turned and walked in the opposite direction, to the petite figure holding a cane in front of the White Team's tents.

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"You came, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I had no reason to turn you down, Sakayanagi."

Most of the students had left the field by now, getting changed out of their sweaty uniforms, and heading off either to celebrate or ruminate over the day.

"Why did you help so much, Ayanokouji-kun?" Sakayanagi softly asked with a confused smile. "Ryuuen-kun's plan was good, but it was your actions that allowed it to work so well, to make sure it keeps working. Class A is completely dysfunctional now."

"Because it was fun," I shrugged. "Class A hasn't experienced a challenge yet. Nor has mine, but I'm hypocritical like that. I wanted them to understand the price that came with winning, something that they hadn't yet understood."

"So, you wanted to teach some naïve young souls how the world works," Sakayanagi laughed lightly. "How considerate of you."

"If I'm being honest, that was a side effect," I admitted. "I needed to see how far ahead Ryuuen, and you, had planned. By continually giving the two of you opportunities, I could analyse how complex the situation was. Without my help it would still have worked, but I would have gained far less information," I explained.

"Everyone was your plaything, weren't they fufufu. So, what was you evaluation, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I considered for a moment how to answer. There was a lot of information, and I had been sorting it out all day, figuring out possibilities.

"You and Ryuuen have known about the sports festival longer than everyone else." I started with something I knew for a fact. "Ryuuen's plan with his class could never have worked otherwise. It was too well-planned to simply be a strategy to lower defences, and no one would have gone ahead of it. He's been planning for today since the start of term, when I suspect Nagumo approached him, along with you." I summed up the easiest conclusion with an accusation.

"Fufufu as expected of you, Ayanokouji-kun, you understand perfectly. Nagumo-senapi didn't take well to his humiliation in volleyball, and so he approached the two of us to target you with secret information," Sakayanagi said, confirming my suspicions.

It was rather obvious, if I thought of it as an attack on me. Class A was never the intended target, but rather the magician waving their hand to distract the audience so Class D would never expect an attack. Neither Ryuuen nor Sakayanagi held Class A in very high regard, so this pre-planned complex strategy they had worked on was more effort than they considered Class A to be worth. From the very beginning they had been trying to defeat me.

"You certainly came out well in this situation. Did you abandon Ryuuen and his plans for the betterment of your own class?" I asked.

"Why yes, I may have done something along those lines. I wasn't willing to risk my classes results on a plan someone else concocted, after all. Only a fool plays the hand he is delt. Fufufu, Ryuuen-kun wasn't too happy that I didn't go on a full out attack against you, but there was nothing he could do about it. Walk with me?"

"Sure." It was a long way back to school for someone like Sakayanagi, and so I had no problems walking and talking at her slow pace. It wasn't her fault after all.

"Thank you. Long walks like this do get lonely. It's why I keep Masumi-san around, after all," she confessed.

"I'll be sure to tell her that." My first instinct said that her words were a barefaced lie. Sakayanagi kept Kamuro around because she

was useful. But after considering it for a second, I came to a different conclusion.

"Fufufu please do. It's highly entertaining when she gets mad, but I can tell she cares about me."

We walked in silence for a while, before I breached another question.

"I am curious about something."

"Oh?"

"You were the one to supply Class C with the laxatives, weren't you?"

"I suppose in this hypothetical scenario you have concocted, yes I was," she admitted.

"I'm not recording this conversation. But it would have been much too dangerous for Ryuuen and his class to buy them themselves. No, I think you were the mastermind behind the entire plan," I accused.

"Do you really think I'm capable of manipulating Ryuuen-kun?"

"Yes," I said bluntly.

"Fufufu I'm honoured. I suppose I had some input into his plans with his class, but for the most part he worked alone. I had no real desire to target you after all."

"Fair enough."

We continued walking in a comfortable silence, but it wasn't long before our phones buzzed, interrupting the quiet. Sakayanagi didn't even look at hers, simply laughing quietly to herself.

"It seems Ryuuen-kun has had his fun fufufu."

I looked at my phone, to see a message sent to the school message boards, for every year level to see. Opening it up, I realised the problems that this would bring.

Horikita kneeling on the ground in front of Ryuuen. So, this was his final victory, huh? Even with his loss he couldn't let go, sowing seeds of discord into my class just because he could.

"This will be troublesome," I muttered. I had hoped to have Horikita and Hirata keep the class in line. Part of me though, was excited. I had expected a result like this, just not as dramatic as public humiliation. The over-the-top nature of Ryuuen's actions were what gave me cause for concern, not the inevitable fallout in Class D. The latter was expected from the beginning.

"So Ryuuen-kun gets the last laugh, I see."

"Why did you go along with Hirata's plan?" I asked.

"Hirata-kun? What about him?" Sakayanagi feigned ignorance.

"I know that Hirata was the original traitor, who gave Ryuuen the fake participation table. And yet, you still went along with his plan to target Horikita."

"Explain why it was him, and how you knew, and I'll be more than willing to tell you, Ayanokouji-kun," Sakayanagi bargained.

"It was rather obvious from watching his actions all day. He was more afraid than anyone upon seeing the changed participation table, probably assuming Horikita got one over him. Then he spent the rest of the day badly lying, trying to figure out who it was that betrayed the class. To anyone paying attention it was clear he was lying."

"What a useless traitor."

"No, it was the guilt that got to him. Hirata wants to protect everyone, even sacrificing our chances at Class A to do so. That's the complete opposite of Horikita, and so he made the choice to betray his nature by sacrificing the danger, pulling her out of her position of power to protect everyone else. The one truth he told was that he thought the traitor should be exposed and punished. The guilt was eating at him, and part of him wants to be given what he derserves," I explained. Hirata had struggled with his betrayal all day, justifying his actions for the greater good, just as he condemned Horikita for.

"What a twisted man. Although I understand why he is in Class D now. There are a few students who seem like they have no problems, who shouldn't be in your class. The ranking system may be unfair, but it is honest about who belongs where at least," Sakayanagi reasoned.

"So?"

"Ah yes. We went along with it for fun. It was an easy chance to obtain an ally in another class, although that wasn't the main goal. Pulling down someone superior like Horikita is simply too good of an opportunity to let go. It was rather entertaining seeing Hirata on his knees begging for us to only target her and leave the rest of his classmates alone."

I stayed silent in response.

"Fufufu are you upset, Ayanokouji-kun? Disappointed in me?" Sakayanagi asked with a smile.

"On the contrary, I completely understand and sympathise. I do have another question if you don't mind."

"Feel free to ask, but I'd rather not keep Masumi-san waiting." Looking over, I could see Kamuro waiting near the changing rooms.

"Was Ryuuen satisfied with the results?"

"Fufufu a rather difficult question, I see. Unfortunately, Ryuuen-kun underestimated your abilities, despite my warnings," Sakayanagi explained.

"You told him we shared a past?"

"Oh of course not, although I'm pleased you consider it as such.

No, I simply urged him to be more cautious. Despite his plan to whittle down your numbers working better than he expected, and Class A being shattered, he still lost at the end by underestimating you, as well as Kouenji-kun I suppose. No, I don't believe Ryuuen-kun will be satisfied. His goal was to beat you after all, something he didn't manage, not even considering the point loss."

"I appreciate the explanation."

"I thought you would. Ah, Masumi-san, thank you for waiting."

We had arrived back at the changing rooms, where Kamuro was dutifully waiting outside for her master, already changed out of her sports uniform.

"What are you two psychopaths talking about now," she said with an upset look on her face.

"We were discussing how Sakayanagi enjoys taking long walks with you," I said, intentionally trying to annoy her.

"Huh?!"

"Are the two of you dating?" I asked innocently.

"Wait, what the hell are you talking about! Me, dating the flat bitch?"

"Fufufu that's rather rude of you Masumi-san," Sakayanagi said with a gentle smile.

"Hey, I'm not trying to judge either of you. You are together so often, and Sakayanagi talks about you so fondly, I just made an assumption." I stepped forward, leaning over Kamuro slightly. "If that's the case, would you consider going out with me?" I asked.

In response, I got a hard shove in the chest.

"I'd much rather go out with the loli," she grumbled in frustration, before freezing and recognising what she said.

"Fufufu is that so, Masumi-san. I see we have much to talk about. Thank you for your assistance, Ayanokouji-kun, and the conversation," Sakayanagi said with a pleased smile. It seemed I had read the subtext of our conversation, and her body language when talking about Kamuro correctly.

"Don't hold back next time, Sakayanagi. Who knows how long you'll have higher benefactors for," I warned her. After their failure to stop me, I wasn't sure if Nagumo would try again.

"Oh, things change rather quickly in this school, that is something I'm well aware of. Don't worry, in the end I will still defeat you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"No, you won't. But you're welcome to try."

With a smile and a wave, Sakayanagi walked off, with Kamuro following behind talking angrily about how annoying I was, asking her out like that. It was a situation I was sure Sakayanagi had been hoping for, and I had no problem helping her out to achieve it.

Turning away, I made my way to the changing room to get out of my sweaty clothes. The year was half over now, and things were becoming more and more complex. Nagumo had finally gotten involved, and while this event hadn't threatened the class, it most certainly wouldn't be the last danger I faced.

Authors Notes:

Just like the light novel, finishing the sports festival with Sakayanagi is essential. This is the end of Arc 6, moving onto arc 7 next, the paper shuffle event.

Biggest thing for this chapter was reveal that Hirata was the traitor. Personally, I'm very happy with the justification I came up with, especially considering his current circumstances in this fic, but I'm open to discussions about it. He was willing to be expelled to save his classmates in the light novel, so putting a stop to a dissenting person who is knowingly going to harm his classmates makes sense.

It is becoming more and more obvious why Kinu nerfed some characters, or forced them to dislike Ayanokouji, even when it was slightly irrational. If he had any help at all, even one extra person from the better students, wouldn't be a competition.

Also, it's clear why Ike and Yamauchi stuck around as long as they did. Something I didn't think about, but comic relief characters make it a lot easier to write. It may not seem obvious just reading stories, but having someone to salvage a scene through idiocy is really handy. They had to go, but it just makes life harder.

It's also canon that the school puts class d in the inside lane with no staggered start. Since it was mentioned Kinu clearly thought about even that and decided the school thought Class D was just that pathetic. Man is a genius.

Fun fact for everyone, I was very bored writing this arc. Nothing to do with the writing, my life just kinda sucks. So, in every chapter of Arc 6, there was a quote from a league of legends character. Some people picked up on a couple of them, and all of them feel a bit out of place (the lux one was atrocious). If anyone is bored enough feel free to go back and try to find them all.

As I said at the start of this arc, the sports festival is one of my least favourite books, even with the Ryuuen/Horikita stuff. It's just meh compared to the other ones, and I tried to spice it up a bit in my writing. I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did. There will be four SS for this arc coming out in the next few days. If anyone has a particular request for me to write one about a character in my fic, let me know and I might do it. In the mood to smash out a few short chapters.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 12.5.1 - SS Ichinose 2

Today was awful.

In my life, there's only ever been one person I hated – myself.

Not even my father for leaving, because I don't believe he is worth hating. He made his choice years ago, and I'm not going to spend any energy thinking about him.

I, on the other hand, was a perfectly fair target for my hatred.

Everything I thought, said to myself, I deserved it. I wasn't a good sister, a good daughter. I was a criminal, and that was something I could never let go.

And so I never thought I'd find someone else I could hate. Someone worth the energy, who made me so angry!

And yet, here he was. Ayanokouji. The mystery of our year.

Not even in my worst moments did I hate someone as much as I hated him

It was unthinkable. To image another human so cruel, and yet so indifferent, so lacking in empathy. No that wasn't right either. Ryuuen lacked empathy, but he was cruel enough to enjoy the suffering of others.

Ayanokouji simply didn't care.

It was that indifference, that lack of respect or regard for the consequences of his actions. Nothing mattered to him, as long as he won in the end.

The way he spoke so casually about poor Chihiro, fully prepared to ruin her life to an extent even most bullies would go to. He was smart, so very smart, knowing exactly which pressure points to push for the worst result. He knew just how to crush any hope, how to bring people crumbling down.

His actions, his plans that he used to blackmail me, could have driven Chihiro into a dark place. Even suicide wasn't unthinkable for something like that, for someone as timid as her. Of course, there was no choice but to protect her, just as Ayanokouji knew would be the decision.

And not once, was there a flicker of emotion, any empathy, a consideration for a fellow human being. Not once, did her ever show he cared, regret his actions.

It would have even been better if he got pleasure out of them,

like Ryuuen did. At least then I could understand him.

No, there wasn't even a shred of consideration, of humanity in that monster. I thought Ryuuen was being mean with that nickname, but now I see just how true it is.

Ayanokouji isn't a human, he's not like the rest of us. He's a monster wearing human skin. He didn't care at all about the fall out, about how others would suffer. The destruction of Chihiro's life was just a stepping stone, a possible result that didn't matter in any way to him, the only thing that mattered was making the most effective use out of her possible. What a horrid way to think about another human being.

Then there was the guilt.

Because really, this was my fault. I had known back then that the school was a competition. That our classes would be fighting, and that people would fight dirty. We were in the middle of a situation just like that for god's sake!

And I went and invited an enemy to a secret confession from an innocent girl because of my own insecurities.

I was so naïve to think that even that couldn't be weaponised. Everything at this school was a weapon. Ayanokouji had taught me that.

More and more though, I was sure the entire exposure of Komiya and poor Sakura's assault was a setup. Every time I thought back to it, the more it made sense. Of course there was no evidence, someone as meticulous as Ayanokouji wouldn't leave something like that behind, but it was instinct. Because the situation had played out exactly as he wanted it to, working perfectly to save his classmate.

I felt disgusting to admit it, but he had cut off his objectively less valuable classmate to save a high value one, while hurting his enemy. It was painful to categorise people as such, but to fight someone like Ayanokouji, I had to at least attempt to think like him. To think in a world where people weren't people but resources.

All this time though, I had deluded myself. Thinking that despite my hunch, despite every instinct screaming that Ayanokouji had been the mastermind behind that situation there was no way he could have been.

Because what human would be so cruel as to set up a situation like that?

Well, the joke is on me now. Now I see that he isn't human at all.

Today had been painful.

To watch my class collapse, a class I had so lovingly built up, united, and done my best to hold together even through our rough

times. To watch them begin to suspect each other, to accuse each other, to believe the words of an enemy over one of our own.

To stand at the side and watch it happen, able to do nothing to stop it.

I couldn't even risk telling anyone about it. Not even Mako, who had taken the fall for my mistakes. Who I had seen listening to the whisperings of Ayanokouji in her lowest moments, who I had seen rejuvenated by our greatest enemy, believing the whispers of the snake, telling her to eat the apple. I couldn't even tell her of the dangers. Not Kanzaki. Not Shibata. No one could know what happened, with the danger to Chihiro so deadly.

And he continued, never stopping, never ceasing. At every opportunity a few words were dropped, a short conversation had, where he never claimed anything, simply leading people to their own conclusions by suggesting a few facts.

If I didn't hate him so much, I would be impressed.

Even defeated as we were he never gave up. After beating us to the ground, he proceeded to cut off our feet, ensuring that we could never get back up, never trust each other again. He had Kanzaki questioning Mako, Shibata questioning Kanzaki, Mako believing his lies. It was all I could do to not cry to watch my best friends be turned on each other.

All I could do was repeat over and over that it was worth it. To protect Chihiro from my mistake. It was my penance to sit and watch from the sidelines, to force myself through silence.

But it definitely wasn't easy. Especially not with the cruelty of Kushida.

I understood why I had never seen it before. She was so kind and friendly. I thought she was a kindred soul, someone who wanted to get along with everyone.

If that was the case, then why was she so close to Ayanokouji? Almost to the level of romantically.

Everyone knew he wasn't very nice. It was an open fact that he didn't have many acquaintances, let alone friends. The people he interacted with were almost exclusively class leaders, people with power. And Kushida.

One of the nicest girls in school was friends with Ayanokouji, the heartless monster. That in and of itself wasn't suspicious, but she never onced questioned his actions, at least from what I saw. She was entirely devoted to him, his best friend. His only friend. No matter what he did, she stuck by his side.

Of course, there was even less proof there than Ayanokouji having something to do with Sakura. But even so, I was suspicious of her.

I watched her all day. Going from person to person alleviating worries and fears, boosting morale, keeping everyone happy. She even tried to help me, although given my circumstances it didn't help, but hurt.

Perhaps I was overly suspicious. I couldn't keep my mind off Ayanokouji, constantly analysing him, trying to understand him to prevent a similar occurrence.

It wasn't fair to group Kushida with him, just because they were friends.

But, conversely, because they were friends I couldn't help but be suspicious of her.

Kushida had contacts everywhere. If I thought about it in a truly logical sense, Ayanokouji would of course work with Kushida. The two of them combined... it was a truly scary thought. But again, there was no proof.

Ah, but it hurt so much when she asked if there was no way for me to help my class.

When her innocent questions about my ability to organise and corral my classmates was asked.

When she, supposedly without meaning to, questioned my competency, and I had no choice but to smile and ignore her concern.

When every word she spoke was a direct attack against me, targeting me at my very core, and I could do nothing about it.

But no, I was jumping at shadows. I couldn't be afraid and make mistakes. Because if Kushida wasn't an enemy, then going after her best friend most certainly would make her one.

Kushida aside, today had taught me one thing.

I can confidently say I hate another person. Today had been torture for me. The moment I got back to my dorm I broke down in tears. If Ayanokouji had sent Kushida to break my psyche, then he did a spectacular job.

Congratulations, you monster. Today you win.

I really had hoped we could get along. That we would be able to interact as amicable opponents. At the time I had blamed the school for this situation, but even they weren't prepared for the demon in our grade.

In the end, there was nothing I could do about it. I had to stand by and watch as my class lost and shattered, helpless to intervene, while Kushida, knowingly or unknowingly, stabbed a hundred needles into me.

And in the end, today was the worst day of my life.

Authors Notes:

So, here's my perspective of Ichinose. I'm rather proud of this one, and i think i've figured out how she would be feeling right now pretty accurately. To make what I mean clear: I don't decide what the characters are thinking, i do my best to try and figure it out based on what I know and what perspective I've put them in. It makes writing more difficult than if i forced a character to act the way I wanted them to, which is something i've noticed as a common theme in fanfiction in general, but i feel this gives a more genuine depiction of the characters and I believe it's important to put the effort in to understand who you're writing about.

At this point in time, it would be reasonable for characters to grow suspicious of Kushida, even though she hasn't been exposed at all. They all know Ayanokouji to be cruel, so why would such a nice girl hang around with him? Of course, no proof can be drawn from this, as Ichinose so nicely explains for me.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 12.5.2 - SS Hirata 1

Today was good.

Sports festivals were always fun. A way for the entire class to get involved, to compete and play together for an entire day. It brought the class together and raised morale. I had always enjoyed sports festivals.

Except this one was different.

We won, in the end. We didn't get first place, that went to Class B, but in the only metric that matters, we ended up winning the day.

It was from there that everything went wrong.

Today should have been about happiness, having fun competing, and yet all anyone wanted to do was defeat each other. To crush their opponents. It was disheartening to watch some of my own classmate's cheer as our opponents suffered.

Our opponents did the same. Today, there was no one free from blame of guilt. No one had done the right thing.

There was a traitor in Class A, which shook me to my very core. Such a united class, all friends and kind, the sort of class I strived to make mine into, and even they had a traitor.

It was something I couldn't believe, couldn't have imagined, and yet it happened. And because of a betrayal, they lost completely.

Was it Amikura? I couldn't be certain. Most people simply believed what Ryuuen said, but I'd seen enough bullies in my time to know that he was lying, that there was no way we could trust what he said.

And Amikura was being bullied. For her own classmates to place their faith in Ryuuen over hers, it was painful to witness.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get to her in time. Instead, I had to stand and watch as the snake Ayanokouji reached her and became her saviour in a dark place. Once again, he proved himself untrustworthy as instead of helping someone who desperately needed it, he preyed on their fears to manipulate them. His very nature disgusted me.

I didn't know how to stop him though. It was too late. He had slowly and quietly built himself a support base without my realisation, until now it would be difficult for me to touch him.

For some reason, Kushida was always hanging around him, his

so-called 'best friend', and that already elevated him to a dangerous level. I wasn't sure of her intentions, but I hoped I could rely upon her to hold him back, to rely on her good nature to balance his out. There was the grudging respect that the class now gave him, and evidence that he could win the class almost any kind of exam, if he was bothered to try.

He also had Karuizawa, who was convinced he was trying to help her. And nothing I said to her could get through. Even after he expelled Ike and Yamauchi, the opposite reaction that I had hoped for had occurred. She seemed to believe even more fervently that Ayanokouji was looking out for her and couldn't understand why I was so afraid.

'He'll betray you, Karuizawa-san' I urged her. And yet, there was no way to get through to her. She trusted him, at least to defend her, for reasons I couldn't understand.

Ayanokouji wasn't the main problem of today though. Despite all his conniving designs and schemes, I was pretty sure he wasn't the traitor. Especially not when he figured out I was one.

My heart froze for a moment when he said he knew who it was, even though in the end someone else had betrayed us too. But I was, while not confident, somewhat believing that he wasn't the traitor.

Which meant there was someone else out there, who changed the participation table and tried to betray our class by giving it to Ryuuen. And there was only one person I could think of.

Luckily, the plan backfired on her. Her attempt to prove my ideas were wrong couldn't have gone worse, and despite a second traitor appearing, my actions had been successful.

I had proven to the class that Horikita was someone they couldn't rely upon. Someone with ideas beyond her capabilities, who at the first sight of trouble would disappear and not be there to help. Who despite her talk couldn't match her own words.

Hopefully, she would understand. Hopefully she wouldn't blame me, although that was a fool's errand. No, part of me even wanted her to blame me. I deserved it, for what I did to her.

And yet, it had been necessary. To ensure the safety of our class and my classmates, I had to protect them from Horikita's dangerous sacrificial schemes, to make sure they weren't hurt. I had to make the choice to sacrifice Horikita to save the rest.

In theory, it sounds fine. To cast off one subversive element, with dangerous intentions, to protect everyone else, even if it means losing the sports festival. Logically it was correct. And yet, I couldn't get over my guilt at my own actions.

In the end, I had once again bullied someone.

I had thrown Horikita to the wolves, and even though someone changed the participation table somehow, Ryuuen still accepted my plea. I assume due to the joy he would get from such actions. It was disgusting. He was disgusting, and so was I. But I truly thought it was necessary. Necessary to protect my friends. A terrible plan, but the only one I could come up with.

It had to have been Horikita who changed the participation table. I know this because I tried to do the same. I submitted my own, and gave that to Ryuuen, with express instructions to sensei to only use mine and pretend no one else had done so.

I suppose that Horikita also could have done that before me, but I did it directly after our planning meeting. There was no way she could have acted that quickly.

But when I questioned sensei about it, it turned out to be the truth. Both Horikita and I had submitted changed tables, pretending to be from the class. Both of us were trying to undermine the other. And yet, hers found a middle ground that allowed us to win.

Maybe I should have agreed to cooperate with her from the beginning. But it was too late now. Horikita would never work with me again.

She was a smart girl, and I had the utmost respect for her mind. She would without a doubt identify me as a problem in her path to Class A. Ryuuen would probably admit it himself, just to force us to fight.

This ruthless girl, who was willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to reach her goals. I didn't think she would forget this slight, this attack.

Was it worth it? Could I justify what I had done? Even now, I wasn't sure. To protect my classmates I had done what I had never wanted to do again. And I couldn't even tell if it was worth it.

What did I want when I repeatedly questioned Ayanokouji? Did I want him to expose me? I think part of me did, part of me seeking punishment for my actions, wanting to be exposed and blamed by the class. It was the least that I deserved for what I had done today, putting Horikita down and into a humiliating position.

Yes, we won today, but it wasn't worth it. We won at the cost of betrayal, backstabbing and sabotage. We won even though I sacrificed all my beliefs to try and save the class.

So, in the end, even though we won it was meaningless.

And in the end, today was hollow.

Authors Notes:

I hope I did Hirata justice here. It was a little difficult, but i'm pretty happy with how it turned out.

Late update because i died yesterday, will upload tomorrow as per the usual schedule.

Going through a bit of a breakdown now, so I have the last two SS prewritten. I did promise a fifth, and if I write one i will do manabu, but I can't promise anything. Will also be going on a short hiatus after I upload the last one, to figure things out. Right now I'm not in the state of mind to read a book consistently, plan a detailed story arc or consistently write. Should be back within a few weeks, at the very worst a month. Once uni starts again i will have some proper structure to my life and can actually pull myself together again.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 12.5.3 - SS Ryuuen 2

Today was awesome.

Finally, I managed to get some shit to work.

It's been pretty bullshit how so far everything I've tried has been fucked over, outplayed by my opponents, but now it worked. Single-handedly, I managed to cripple Class A, and badly damage Class D.

Except it wasn't single-handedly. And I didn't damage Class D.

I didn't manage it on my own. It would have, if he hadn't interfered, but that monster Ayanokouji got in the way, improved my own plan, and then gifted it to me as if he was the one who made it. As if it had been his plan the entire time, and he was simply presenting me with a win.

To take my strategy and improve it like it was his really pissed me off. It made my efforts and work to ensure it happened feel useless. Once again, Ayanokouji interfered with my strategy, and the result was a hollow, bitter victory.

Class D also didn't suffer, once again because of that fucking monster.

A two-month plan, with my entire class on board, executed to perfection. Fourteen members of Class D out sick for the second half of the day, missing some of their best athletes. I got to toy with Horikita all I wanted, and it was amazing to watch her dance in the palm of my hand.

But even with that deficit, the monster couldn't be stopped.

It was complete bullshit. Almost a third of their teammates missing from capture the flag, and he and that bastard narcissist just run at us and forced their way through to win.

How the fuck do you beat that?

Even when I get the numerical advantage, outmanoeuvre him completely, he still finds a way to win through brute strength. How OP is that?

That pissed me off even more. He let me do it. I was sure Ayanokouji knew what was coming. I had expected him to react, to make some plan to counter me. To someone like him, a master of mind games, there was no way he didn't expect my plan.

But the bastard let it happen, he let me win like it didn't even matter to him at all. And in the end it didn't.

It was that disrespect that ticked me off the most. That he would just sit there and let me attack him and his class, because I wasn't worth his time. It was insulting, it was demeaning, it made my blood boil.

Oh, I would show him. This was just the beginning after all. Just my first proper attack on his class. There would be more, plans and schemes that I would come up with far beyond this one. A two-month operation? That was easy, especially when my class just had to keep one secret. Even those dumbasses managed that pretty well.

This wouldn't end here. Class A was on the verge of collapse. One more loss and I was confident many of them would give up. Their wins had been gifted by god, and now he wasn't on their side they would be taken away.

It was appalling how weak Class A was. To think that they, the distraction in my plan, not even the main focus of my attacks, the main reason, was defeated harder than Class D. It was pathetic how easily they had fallen apart, but once again I couldn't claim that complete credit to myself.

That monster stole that as well, giving me better opportunities, inciting Kanzaki for my moment, acting as if he perfectly knew my mind.

It would have worked even without his help, but the fact that it worked better with an external assistant...

I'm gonna kill that fucker. I'm going to crush him, defeat him even though no one else has yet. Everything that happens in this school, he's involved somehow. Every time, he turns the situation to his favour, no matter how impossible.

This time, it was sheer physical ability, and that is something I simply can't overcome. In a physical confrontation, I will lose. It wasn't a scary though. I'd lost many times in my life, and I'd seen him defeat Horikita on the island. I was confident he hadn't even been trying.

He cannot be beaten through physical means. That is an undisputed fact.

I had thought I knew his limits. I thought such actions were impossible, overcoming such ridiculous odds, predicting my plans and stealing the joy from victory. But even then, he was stronger than I thought. Beyond human comprehension.

Sakayanagi had warned me.

She told me my plan wasn't good enough, that it wouldn't be enough to stop Ayanokouji. It galled me to think she was right.

The stupid petite bitch had known how powerful he was, had told me, and I hadn't listened. And then, she abandoned our plan somewhat to save her own class. So, while I fell into third place, she

came out in first.

I was lucky my class saw today as a victory. I had explained to them from the beginning that we were going to lose out on points, that the white team was at a disadvantage. And so, they believed that crushing Class A, that outplaying Class D was the end goal, and that we had achieved that. They believed that we had met all our goals for the day, and that losing 150 class points didn't matter.

Thank God for that.

Really, I had been planning to get second place, since I knew getting first would be impossible. Coming in third was damaging. We weren't that far from falling to Class D anymore, our buffer window practically gone. They were hot on our heels climbing the ranks, in fact if he hadn't cruelly expelled some useless flotsam from his class, Ayanokouji would have already passed us.

I was going to have words with Sakayanagi. She knew about him, more than most people did. Somehow, she knew him before coming to this school. Out of everyone he interacted with, she was probably one of his closest relationships outside of his own class. My spies had informed me every time they met up, and it was often.

Sakayanagi had known how smart he was, how strong he was. That was why she had warned me that my plan wouldn't be enough. I bet she'd been laughing as it fell apart when I didn't believe her.

Oh, there would be a reckoning one day, but for now I had my target. Ayanokouji. I would beat him. It was a promise I had made multiple times, but up until now I hadn't understood what it would take.

A man that was almost omnipotent, understanding everything that was happening. Who knew about imminent danger, and did nothing to stop it, in fact he let it happen. Who, despite all odds, consistently came out on top.

I had no idea how to defeat him.

I knew I would. It was inevitable, but going up against him was an entirely different challenge. A leviathan in our grade, and it would take a combination of forces to beat him. But even so, even if it took everything I had, Ayanokouji would lose to me one day.

But as for today, it was his victory. My plan had executed perfectly, and it still hadn't been enough.

In the end, even though I won, I lost in all the metrics I cared about.

And in the end, today was disappointing.

Authors Notes:

Another Ryuuen SS. This one was interesting as i had to include

his frustration at his plans never working, and then when they work it wasn't even him. Ryuuen is a proud character, so he's pretty pissed at this point. He doesn't care if everyone else sees him as successful, to his own hind he hasn't won yet.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 6 Chapter 12.5.4 - SS Kushida 3

Today was shit.

God, it was awful. Nonstop cheering, supporting people I detested. Cheering them up, motivating everyone, my usual activities but multiplied by 100.

Of course, it was a net positive in the end. With all the problems that happened in the day, with our participation table changed, with our classmates retiring sick, I had ample chances to prove how trustworthy I was, how reliable I was, how good of a friend I was. And with all the races I did well in, or won, thanks to Ayanokouji, I once again cemented myself as a central figure in our class.

Despite all the annoyances, frustration, in the end it was all worth it. Today had been worth it.

Of course, the day hadn't been without entertainment. And that's why, as I lay in bed finally having gotten home from the celebrations, I couldn't help but giggle in happiness.

Normally, after such a day I would be doing my best to relax, avoiding my phone and any messages, drinking some water and trying not to vomit. Normally, I had to go through a calming ritual to even be able to sleep. I had to try and forget about my 'friends' and all the inane bullshit they complained about. I had to forget about every boy who asked me out, who's gaze I could feel on my thighs, on my breasts and had to pretend like I ignored it.

It made me proud, sometimes, to know how amazing I was, how attractive I was, and that every boy would lust after me, making them so very easy to control. When I wasn't completely disgusted by their actions, it made me giddy, to know that I could so very easily manipulate them. To know that just by acting nice, I could get anyone to do whatever I wanted, by being someone reliable, because girls trusted other pretty cute girls, I could get away with almost anything if I was careful, just because I was so perfect. But most of the time it made me ill.

There was only one person I wouldn't mind looking at me like that, but he never seemed to care. Maybe that was why I wouldn't mind if he stared.

But what he had done today, what Kiyotaka had made our entire grade to do... it was insane. It was beautiful. It was amazing.

I had torn a single class apart, and caused small problems in an entire grade, but that was the result of years of effort being exposed. He had gone around with a few conversations, one secret as leverage, and predicting the actions others would take.

The result was pure chaos in our own class, and the supposedly best class in the grade completely broken again, coming in last. The result was our class being smashed by Ryuuen, but still winning when it mattered. The result was my being able to tease the shit out of that bitch Ichinose, to push her buttons constantly until she broke. I couldn't help but smile when I saw her walking away from me with tears coming out her eyes.

I could never trust a person like her. So oblivious to the people around her, and always so fucking nice. It makes me sick, to know that there's such a genuinely nice person around, someone threatening my chance to be the best. I can only thank Kiyotaka for giving me the chance to bully the shit out of her, just for one day.

But of course, we won. We had Kiyotaka to lead us to victory, there was never a chance of us losing. Just thinking about how I once wanted to expel him makes me upset with myself. To think that I once hated him, that I wanted nothing more than to get rid of him along with the bitch Horikita.

And now, I can't imagine life here without him.

I never really cared about graduating from Class A, but he is the only one who could stand up to people like Ryuuen, like Sakayanagi. If we didn't have him, then we'd languish in pathetic amounts of points forever. I wouldn't have the millions of points he'd been securing for months.

And I'd still be alone. Now that I have him, that I know what it's like to be with someone, and really trust them, I could never go back.

The class was finally waking up to him. Moronic sheep that they were, their pride hadn't let them see the truth.

Ayanokouji was a dick. That was the best way to describe him in his interactions with most people. He didn't care what they thought, he was blunt and rude. He didn't pay them the attention they thought they deserved and went about things his own way. He ignored people they respected, aside from me, and for that the class was wilfully ignorant. They didn't want to believe that someone like him could be their only chance. They didn't want their hero, their leader to be someone with that attitude.

Even after winning the Island exam and the zodiac exam, they still tried to ignore it. Sure, he was respected enough, but it was grudging. It made me mad, to see someone so amazing not getting what he deserved. But now he would.

Like the sheep they were, suddenly there was empirical evidence of how great Kiyotaka was. Watching him run, I could see the pathetic opinions of my classmates changing, suddenly liking the boy they had all tried to brush off, suddenly talking about how great it was to have him in our class. As if Kiyotaka belonged to them, as if he worked for anyone but himself.

I hated them all even more when I heard that.

And then the bitch, the fucking hanger-offer whore Shinohara who lost her spot in the class hierarchy when she pissed off Karuizawa, who I definitely had more respect for now, tried to get in with him. My Kiyotaka.

Oh, it felt good to see him brush her off like she was less than dirt. She was worthless, a useless person in our class. She kept her friends by being a bully, but sooner or later they would leave her too. I watched and laughed internally as she made a grab for the most desirable man in the class, and utterly failed.

He's not yours Shinowhorea. He doesn't belong to anyone, no matter how much I wished he did. But I belong to him. And that's more than anyone else can say.

It was a risky move. Kiyotaka might be thick enough not to realise what I'm trying to signal to him in private, but most of the population would notice a hug in public. It was a dangerous play, something that he realised too, but I wasn't going to let him go without a fight.

To hug him in public, to show favour over other people was dangerous. Most of my connections came from boys desperate for me, lust clear in their eyes. The easiest way to keep them all up was to never have a boyfriend, to be eternally available. By choosing one person above the rest, I risked alienating everyone else.

I had a lot of justifications for my actions though.

It would probably be easy enough to still learn from them, get their secrets and trust, to extend my spiderweb even further. Even if I had a boyfriend, I could shove their hate onto him, play guilty and most boys would eat out of my palm, acting exactly how I wanted them too. If I ended up dating anyone, it would be a trial, but I could make it work.

It also helped that we had been close friends for a while. If I had kept my friendship with Kiyotaka hidden, like I initially wanted to, then all it would seem as if I had been going for the best man in the class. As it was, I already held the advantage over every other girl there was, being the closest person to him, so I could act with natural progression in our relationship, not simply jumping him when he looked good.

Ah, I should stop deluding myself.

Of course, I could justify all my actions. I never would have done anything if I didn't have a good reason to take a side and risk my standing. But that was all surface. Deep down I knew the truth.

I was jealous, and I didn't want to let him go, to let another girl take my Kiyotaka. At this point, being so open to him, with him trusting me enough to tell me his plans, things that no one else knew, with him knowing all my secrets, being the only person, I felt comfortable around, I couldn't be separated from him. Never.

If it meant keeping him, I would even sacrifice a few contacts. That realisation had shocked me at first, but now it seemed only natural. For so long, my life's purpose had been to be the best at getting secrets, but now that had waned. Yes, if it meant staying by Kiyotaka's side, I would let some boys or girls hate me.

Of course, I wouldn't give up everything for him. But there were people I didn't care about, people I could ignore or forget. I guess my purpose in life had shifted somewhat. I guess this is what happens when you have someone who knows you inside and out, and still accepts you.

Yes, I was making my territory. That was the real reason. I even told him that, something that made me flush in embarrassment looking back on it. But that was the truth behind my movements. We were partners, and I was damned if I was going to let someone take that away.

In the end, today had been incredible to watch, and I had gotten everything I wanted.

And in the end, today was amazing.

Authors Notes:

So, as always with the Kushida SS, i had a lot of fun with this one. She's always an interesting character to work with and develop, and so her chapters naturally end up longer. I just find it easier to relate and understand her headspace, what she would be thinking, than to someone like Ichinose or Hirata.

This is officially the last chapter of Arc 6, and the halfway point of my fic. Although that's not an important division. This fic is split into three main sections, four arcs each, and so the next two arcs will be the build-up and climax of this section.

I am going on a hiatus. Life is rough and I've got to sort some stuff out without a schedule. I will keep working on this, but i won't be forcing myself into an upload schedule until i start publishing again. I WILL BE BACK, that's a promise.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 7 Chapter 1 - No Rest for the Wicked

The relaxed happiness in the room was shattered the moment Chabashira walked in.

The sports festival had finished just the day before, and the entire class was celebrating our success and results. There was a cheerful air, of satisfaction and hope. This was the third exam in a row that our class had won, and what could be argued away as a fluke before could no longer be ignored.

We, Class D, the defective and worst class in the school, were the biggest threat in the grade.

At least, that was how it appeared to an outward observer, and even then, it would be considered an exaggeration.

In reality, I had spent the entire morning brushing off people trying to talk to me. A constant barrage of compliments, conversation attempts and even flirting was getting on my nerves at this point.

In just one day, the entire class's perception of me had shifted into a rather annoying state. While I was most definitely not the social outcast from the start of the year, or the begrudgingly put-up-with existence from our cruise onwards, this newfound acceptance of me was frustrating to say the least.

I had no intention of being a central person in my class, of being a leader people would listen to. That wasn't how I worked, and it was more trouble than it was worth. I had set up Horikita, Hirata to lead, Kikyou to unite the class and manipulate it in the direction I wanted. I myself had no intention of taking up that role, nor of interacting with people for no purpose. It simply wasn't worth my time.

"Aren't you popular this morning," my seatmate muttered to me quietly.

"I notice you're rather the opposite," I retorted.

"There's not much I can do about that," Horikita said with a resigned tone. "Circumstances have caused a rather unfortunate turn of events." I noticed her eyes flickered briefly to where Hirata was sitting, chatting simultaneously with several people.

"Is there a problem with how the situation turned out?" I asked curiously. Horikita had given me her opinion yesterday afternoon, but I was interested in whether it would have changed overnight.

"Purely considering the results and our chances of reaching Class A, not particularly. However, I'm loath to trust a situation within which I have no control."

"That I can understand," I acknowledged, earning me a glare.

"I'm incapable of leaving my future in the hands of another person. I simply can't trust them to succeed when my involvement might make a difference. Also," she said with a steel in her voice, "I have my pride to consider. I'm not going to roll over and give up."

"Your ego never ceases to amaze me, Horikita," I mused.

Another glare, followed by a resigned sigh.

"Yes, I can admit I am rather egotistical when it comes to my actions and beliefs, although they are backed up by empirical evidence, which does make it hard to separate confidence from ego. But I'm certain my involvement in the class can make a difference for the better, and I will not abandon us to the whims of someone who admitted they would sacrifice our chances to reach Class A to save a single person."

Internally, I agreed completely with Horikita. Hirata, while capable enough, wasn't someone I truly trusted to lead our class, to give complete control of decision making to. But it was much more fun to tease her.

"But mostly it's your hurt pride, right?"

Horikita didn't deign to respond to that jab.

Before our conversation could continue any further, Chabashira entered the room, a pile of papers in her hands. Slowly but surely, the entire class returned to their desks, tensions mounting as they noticed the look on her face.

Chabashira wasn't wearing her usual dislike or distaste, or even her incredibly rare happy and proud look, but one of frustration.

There wasn't a student in the room who missed it.

Reaching her desk with a sigh, Chabashira placed down her papers, before returning to the podium at the front of the class. Absolute silence filled the room as we waited for her to speak.

"The school has made an executive decision regarding the structure of your learning this semester," she finally said. "Since the sports festival was later in the term than it usually is, it has been decided that your midterm and end of term exams are cancelled."

A loud cheer erupted in the room, mostly originating from the less academic students, boys and girls alike. However, I found it suspicious that Chabashira was so frustrated over this. No, the cancelation of exams should just mean she has less work. What had her so upset was a combination of the executive decision, and whatever else they decided. I clearly wasn't the only one in the

room who thought so.

"Instead, they have been replaced with a special exam."

That silenced everyone in an instance as they processed what Chabashira had just said.

"But we just finished the sports festival! Don't we ever get a break?" Shinohara whinged.

"This exam was going to occur anyway. Be grateful that you don't have to do your exams like usual, simply because of the nature of this special exam," Chabashira quickly interrupted the complaint.

It was interesting how she described the reasoning. I could see why the exams were cancelled if we were supposed to have an exam anyway. We were past the halfway mark already, and including this new special exam, plus our end of term exams, there wouldn't have been much time at all.

"Now, before I explain the special exam, I need to show you the new class points."

Saying so, Chabashira picked up the large roll of paper and stuck it on the board. Everyone in the class, despite having a good idea, all took a look at it.

Class A – 928 (-100)

Class B – 908 (-50)

Class C – 767 (-150)

Class D – 690 (0)

Another cheer filled the room, albeit with less energy than the last, upon seeing the results. Very quickly, we were catching up to the other classes, or having smaller losses than them, and it wouldn't be long at the current pace before we overtook Class C. In fact, if Yamauchi and Ike hadn't been expelled and cost us 100 points, we would already have passed them.

"Yes, congratulations. I suppose you aren't a complete disappointment of a class. No Class D has ever lost so many points at the beginning of the year, but neither have they gained points so quickly either."

Yes, our rate of growth was much higher than the other classes, all of which were about the same level they had been at the beginning of the year. Only Class D had made any significant advancements so far.

"Sensei, please tell us about the exam before we get any more nervous," Hirata prompted.

"Very well. Next week, there will be a short test with problems from eight subjects. There will be one hundred questions on the test, making for a total of one hundred possible points. However, the questions will be on a third-year junior high school level. This test is meant to confirm that you remember your fundamentals.

Furthermore, much like the mock test you took in the first semester, it won't affect your grades."

The tension in the class seemed to drain away from most people upon hearing that it would be easy. To many people, exams were a stressful occurrence, and even just the thought of them could induce panic. To hear that it wouldn't matter was a relief.

For those who had no problem with exams, including myself, it all seemed suspicious. Everything in this school had a purpose, but it was hidden for this one. I couldn't help but feel on edge about the upcoming practice exam.

"However—this test's results will have an enormous impact on your next final exam," she added.

Of course. Nothing could be simple at this school. Our next challenge was about to begin, it seemed. Replacing our midterms and end of semester exams with a special exam based on a quiz only made it that much clearer that this was an academic challenge we would be facing.

"Wait, what kind of impact? Can you tell us?" Sudou asked. I understood his frustration. Chabashira had purposefully drawn things out to exacerbate the class's anxieties.

"I would love to help you understand, Sudou. The school has decided that this next quiz's results will help determine which students to partner in class," said Chabashira.

"Partner?" Hirata sounded suspicious.

"That's right. Pairs decided based on this test will go on to take the final exam together. There will be eight subjects on that exam, each worth a total of one hundred points. Four hundred test questions, fifty for each subject. There are also two possible ways for you to fail that exam. If your pair scores under sixty in even one subject, then the school will expel both students. The sixty-point total, by the way, refers to the partners' combined score. For example, let's say Sudou and Hirata were partners. Even if Sudou scored zero points, they'd both be safe as long as Hirata scored sixty points."

Everyone gasped. With an excellent partner, this would be an easy test.

However, this still left the second method of failing.

"There's one additional hurdle to overcome. The school has decided that you must secure a certain overall score to avoid failing. Even if you get sixty points or more in each of the eight individual subjects, failing to meet this overall score requirement will mean expulsion."

"So, the overall requirement represents both partners' combined score?"

"Yes, exactly. The school hasn't yet determined the exact score required, but in years past, it's been around seven hundred points," said Chabashira.

Seven hundred points. With two people working together across eight subjects—sixteen scores in total, two for each subject—you'd need a minimum average of 43.75 points in every subject. Even excellent students like Horikita or Yukimura could be at risk, depending on their partner. I however wasn't concerned. No matter who my partner was, I was confident I could score well enough to pass for both of us.

"You mentioned that the overall required score is still unclear. Why?" asked Hirata.

"Don't be so hasty. I'll explain the overall requirements in more detail later. The final exam will be held over two days, with four subjects per day, and I'll let you know the subjects' order. In the event that someone is absent due to poor health, the school will investigate the absence's legitimacy. If it's confirmed to be unavoidable, the student will receive points based on a rough estimate of what they would've earned given past test results. However, should the school find that an absent student didn't have sufficient reason to miss class, they will receive a score of zero points for all tests missed," Chabashira-sensei replied.

We couldn't avoid taking this exam. The school was telling us that caring for our health was another test of ability.

I was surprised by the class's reaction. Yes, we had faced expulsion in exams before, but not to this level. To have your fate at school in the hands of your partner was something to be concerned about, especially for people like Horikita.

This would be the most dangerous exam we had faced yet. Theoretically, everyone could be expelled right now, if we did badly enough. And yet, there was a distinct lack of panicking.

It could also be the amount of information we were just provided had short-circuited everyone's minds as they tried to process it.

"You all seem to be taking this very well," Chabashira admitted, mirroring my thoughts. "I should warn you... in the past, we called this exam the 'Paper Shuffle' and every year one or two pairs are expelled from it, usually in Class D. This is by no means a threat; I'm just telling you facts.

"The school will expel any failed partners without exception. If you think this is a mere threat, then it might be good for you to talk to an upperclassman. You should've started building connections with them, after all," said Chabashira. "Lastly, although this is obvious, cheating is forbidden. Anyone who cheats will immediately be disqualified and expelled, along with their partner.

The same applies to all midterm and final examinations."

If this were an ordinary high school, the punishment for cheating would probably be an automatic zero in all subjects, a stern warning, or suspension at the very most. Chabashira was giving us ample warning to prevent students from panicking and making mistakes. However, the pair system was still a real problem.

"After I get the short test's results, I'll tell you how the all-too-important partners will be decided," Chabashira added.

There was a very interesting piece of information mentioned in her obviously pre-prepared speech that differed from usual. It would be the key to understanding the exam, obviously. But I still felt something was missing. Why was it called the Paper Shuffle? Clearly there was a difference to the usual exam, but Chabashira had yet to explain that to us.

"One more aspect of this final exam will challenge you," said Chabashira.

While the rest of the class was slightly agitated by this, Horikita appeared mildly exasperated. "So, there's another thing we have to do?"

"Yes. First, the school will ask you to create your own questions to appear on the final exam. They'll use the questions you come up with for one of the other three classes. That means classes will be able to attack one another, so to speak. The school will compare your class's overall score to the overall score for the class that received your test questions. The class that scores higher will take points from the losing class. Fifty class points, specifically," said Chabashira.

To sum up, pairs needed to score above seven hundred points in aggregate or be expelled. Meanwhile, we also needed to score sixty points or higher for each individual subject or be expelled. Furthermore, our entire class's overall score had to exceed the overall score of the class whose test questions we set.

"In the event of a one-on-one confrontation of that kind, class scores may go up or down by a hundred points at a time. Don't worry. Although this is unlikely, if the overall scores are tied, then the matchup will end in a draw, and no class will lose or gain points," said Chabashira.

"So, we have to come up with problems for the other classes to solve. I've never heard of anything like this. How will this be executed? If someone devises absurdly hard questions..." Hirata seemed particularly concerned by this scenario, a sentiment that echoed across the class once he mentioned it.

"Teachers will evaluate the questions you create. If they exceed what you have been taught, or cannot be answered with the

information provided, they will be revised. We'll ensure that each class submits fair questions and answers." explained Chabashira.

"Creating four hundred questions, huh? That'll make for a pretty tight schedule," said Hirata.

"If you do not complete the questions in time, the school will provide them for you. But keep in mind, these questions will be simple," Chabashira warned. "You may consult teachers and students from other classes, and you can use the internet. There are few restrictions. As long as the school accepts the questions, we don't care about much else."

"So, our final test will obviously include questions from another class, right?"

"Exactly. Each class will choose another class to compete against, and I will report that request to my superiors. If another class makes the same choice, representatives will draw lots. However, if there are no duplicate nominations, your choice of class will be honoured. I'll accept your nomination for the class you'd like to go up against next week, the day before the short test. You should think very carefully," she added. "That's all for the preliminary explanation. Since classes are over, you can stay and chat. The rest is up to you."

Finishing her part, Chabashira walked over to her desk and took a seat, waiting to see what we did.

Surprisingly, the only person to leave was Kouenji. It wasn't surprising that he left, but that no one followed him.

Instead, the second person to move was Hirata. Mirroring the day, we were told about the sports festival, he got up from his seat and made his way to the front of the room. Standing at the podium, he looked at us, many expectant faces waiting to hear what he would say.

Out the window, I saw a bird land in a nest on a tree and began to feed its chicks. A very interesting part of nature I was looking forward to watching this afternoon.

Sighing, I turned my attention back as Hirata began to talk. It wouldn't do to miss hearing what he said.

"This is a big exam that was suddenly dropped on us, but I'm not at all concerned about it. We did well in the sports festival, and we have the bonus points from our events to help us. With enough study, I don't think we have anything to worry about, as long as everyone can answer at least half of their exams."

It was a good mentality to have, but there was a problem with the uncertainty of the situation. We didn't know how partners could be picked yet, and based on the exam setup, it was expected that most people probably wouldn't get over half. Hirata's plan, while

good, was unrealistic.

"I'm going to be running some study groups again, and I hope that everyone can come along to them. Yukimura-kun, would you be willing to help out?" It was a question, but Hirata's firm tone brooked no chance to refuse. There was a steel in his voice, one that had come about since the sports festival. Any reservations Hirata may have had about leading the class firmly were now gone, the sports festival having finished the job I began in the first semester.

Gone was the kind boy, who wanted to get along with everyone, who had firm morals and restrictions. Now there was a man who had gone through betrayals, backstabbing, and watched three of his friends gone. No more was he willing to stand for people to make the 'wrong' decisions. Hirata wasn't prepared for another incident like the betrayal at the sports festival to happen.

It seemed he was prepared to take the class by the throat and drag them through this exam, if it kept us all safe and not expelled.

"Sure, I'd be happy to take a smaller group. I don't think I can help lots of people though," Yukimura admitted.

"That's fine. Every little bit helps. Kushida-san, I'd also like your help tutoring people."

"Sure, yeah! It'll be loads of fun all working together again!" Kikyou exclaimed with a bright smile.

The two cooperative people done, Hirata finally became a proper annoyance, and turned his attention onto me.

"Ayanokouji, would you mind tutoring some people?"

"Nah, I won't."

Hirata didn't even flinch at my refusal. Most likely he had already suspected my stance, but I had cooperated more at the sports festival. It wasn't completely strange to imaging that I might feel like participating.

"We need everyone involved in this exam. Your marks might be good enough to pass, but there's no sense risking it for other people."

"I'll tutor my partner obviously. I don't want to be expelled either, but beyond that I won't help. Besides, we don't even know who we're paired with, and the exam is still weeks away. Setting up study groups now is rather pointless," I pointed out. We might have the practice test next week, but the final was still three weeks away.

I could feel a sense of approval coming from Chabashira at her desk.

"There's nothing wrong with getting ready early, but I guess I can't force you to help the class. If you tutor your partner, then that's all I can ask."

Before the sports festival, Hirata might have pushed further, but I

had made my position clear. Much like Kouenji, in some ways, I would help out how I wanted to, when and if I felt like it. Trying to press any more wouldn't change a thing.

"I'd also like to lead a study group, Hirata-kun."

Turning in surprise, I looked at Horikita who had spoken up.

"You'll understand if I'm hesitant, Horikita-san. After all, we were relying on you at the sports festival, before you let us down. I wouldn't want something like that to happen again," Hirata replied, with thinly veiled distain.

"If you remember correctly, I was the one who ensured that everyone studied and passed the exams last semester. I see no reason why my performance in the sports festival should limit my ability to tutor."

"It's not your ability, but your reliability I'm concerned about. But I suppose it is up to our classmates to decide. I can't stop you tutoring anyone, but I'll expect you to report your results as you go," Hirata conditionally conceded.

"Do you doubt my ability to tutor? It should be beyond reproach by now."

"Even so, I would like a reassurance you aren't going to let us down again. Since everyone is buddied up, the risks are much higher. If you want to regain my trust, this is what is needed." Hirata was refusing to back down, much to the indignation of Horikita. It was an obvious slight to her skills as an academic, and she took one more blow to her pride.

"Fine. I'd also like to help with writing the exam questions."

"No."

Sighing I took out my phone and sent a message. This wasn't going to be resolved any time soon.

"No? Do you truly trust me so little? Did my failures at the sports festival impact your faith in my so much?" A note of fury filled her voice, as Horikita's ability to control her own destiny was slowly being taken away from her.

"You made bold claims, and wholly failed to live up to them. Forgive me for being sceptical, Horikita-san."

"Exam questions are very easy to check, to ensure I've done a good job. The only people to score above me are Yukimura-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, and Kouenji-kun. There is no reason to refuse my help."

Hirata took a moment in silence, collecting himself, and clearly about to say something he found to be in poor taste. The class had gone silent as the two debated and raged, unsure who they supported.

"I don't have a problem with your ability to come up with

questions. It's your ability to not tell other classes that I doubt."

A sharp intake of breath could be heard at this insult. Hirata had just called Horikita a traitor.

"You dare—"

"Horikita-san, Hirata-kun, please stop!" Horikita was interrupted before she could continue from a yell from Kikyou. "Please, you're both angry, and we're not getting anything done today. Everyone wants to go home, so let's go talk about this somewhere else. We can make more decisions another day." There was a pleading concerned tone to her voice, and instantly, with the arrival of a calm and reasonable person, the entire class picked her side. Kikyou had picked a perfect chance to enter the conversation.

"Fine. We'll speak about this elsewhere today, and come to a concensus tomorrow. That is, if everyone is happy with us making the decision?" Hirata asked, looking around the class.

There were numerous nods and agreements, and everyone began to pack up their stuff to go. A palpable relief filled the air, as everyone hurried to escape the tense conversation going on. Most of my classmates had nothing to contribute, and just wanted to leave it up to our leaders. As long as they had a general idea of what was going on, there weren't many people who would complain about not getting to write exam questions. Horikita was unusual like that.

"Thanks, Kikyou-chan!"

"Aha, it's no trouble. I just wanted to get everyone home," she replied sheepishly.

This pattern of complimenting and thanking Kikyou continued as everyone left the room.

As most people left, so did Horikita join up with Hirata and Kikyou at the front of the room, with Yukimura and Karuizawa joining them soon after. I wasn't sure why the latter did, but no one sent her away, and once they were all there, the five of them left as a group, Hirata and Horikita pointedly avoiding looking at each other.

Soon enough, I was left alone in the classroom with Chabashira. Picking my stuff up, I walked over to her desk.

"I'd love to say I'm surprised you want to talk to me, but it's a foregone conclusion at this point."

"Maybe you're just my best friend and I was feeling lonely," I joked.

"Very funny. What do you want, Ayanokouji?" As usual, Chabashira got right down to business.

"You'll submit the questions I give you. You won't show them to anyone else. Same deal as last time," I ordered.

"As expected. I didn't think you'd leave it up to anyone else to

do."

"We'll also be targeting Class C. If not them, then Class B. Do everything you can to avoid Class A."

"Any particular reason? Ah, but I guess I'll agree with you. That's how we work, right?" There was a tone of bitterness in her voice. Clearly Chabashira had been looking forward to the chance to target Class A and her rival Hoshinomiya.

"Right. I'm curious though, why the sudden change? This should have been something planned much further ahead."

"Well, you see, it was actually the Vice President who began pushing for it. The election is in a few weeks, and he'll take office then. Nagumo argued that it would be good practice for him to help handle exams."

I was surprised that Nagumo already had the connections to push for something like this, but it didn't surprise me that he was trying to interfere in my year. He had already given foreknowledge to the other classes in an attempt to beat me, and while he probably wouldn't rely so much on them again in the future after their failures, he also wasn't going to back down.

"Interesting, but not concerning. When are the elections?"

"Second last week of term is when they're being held. The same week you do your exam," Chabashira explained, leaning back in her chair.

"Well, that's certainly a lot to think about, and I have to go organise our leaders."

Chabashira gave a smirk at my words. "Yes, they were getting rather rowdy. Good luck with whatever you're planning, Ayanokouji. We've been doing well, and Hoshinomiya is getting rather infuriated by my success."

"I'll be sure to continue it then. Remember, my questions only and don't let anyone know. I might also need your help with something else later on." I had a hunch that there would be more going on that most people expected.

"Fine. Now, off you go. I need to close up the classroom for the day."

Picking up my bag, I walked out of the room, contemplating my next move. It wasn't just our class, and hopefully Class C I had to consider. I had a worrying feeling that after wrangling my leaders into shape, sorting out their issues, that I would have to deal with someone playing at being the devil.

I let out a sigh. We finished the last exam not even 24 hours ago. There really was no rest for the wicked.

Authors Notes:

I'M BACK! Holy shit it's been four weeks to the day since i last updated. As i outlined in my community post, it's been a rough month, but i'm starting to work through my problems, and that starts with writing consistently again, and uploading here. Thank you to everyone wishing me health, but I'm doing ok now.

Right in with Arc 7, we have the paper shuffle exam. I'm pretty excited about this one, and while like the sports festival it's always felt kinda underwhelming, I've done some solid planning and hopefully it turns out how i'd like.

THis was a bit of a filler chapter. I just re-explained the exam for anyone who forgot, and it also gave me a crutch to motivate myself to write with an easier chapter.

To everyone who stuck around and waited for me, thank you so much. To all the new readers who joined in my hiatus, welcome to my fic. Uploading every second day once again from now on.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 7 Chapter 2 - The Gauntlet

I made my way to Pallet café now that I had finished my business with Chabashira. Kikyou had sent me a message to inform me that she'd managed to gather the important figures in our class, and they were now just waiting on me.

That was a tricky situation to manage. I didn't want to become a super important figure, someone relied upon, but I also didn't want to miss out on meetings like this. Sending a proxy simply didn't cut it, especially with the razor thin margins I was working with. One piece of missed information could be the difference at that point, and I wasn't willing to take that risk.

Walking in, the café was just as busy as ever, something I was thankful for. It was hard to get a seat here, but there was always plenty of noise cover for covert conversations.

Looking around, I quickly spotted Kikyou waving at me from a booth in the corner. Walking over, I took a seat beside her, a coffee already in front of me.

On Kikyou's other side was a disgruntled Horikita, glaring dangerously at Hirata, who was sitting across from us with Karuizawa sitting on the same side, but as far along the bench as she could possibly get from him. This was obviously going to be a tense meeting.

"Sorry to make you wait. I just wanted to confirm something with Chabashira," I explained.

"What were you asking her, Ayanokouji? You were a lot more involved yesterday than I expected, so I'd like to know how much you're going to participate this time." As expected, it was Hirata who pounced on the information. Neither Karuizawa nor Kikyou would particularly care about my conversation, trusting me to do what was best, and Horikita wasn't quite as nosy.

"I was just checking with her who submitted participation tables for the sports festival. I didn't want a repeat of that to happen," I lied.

Both Hirata and Horikita went rigid at that, obviously worried about what I found out, but relaxed when I didn't elabourate any further. I also didn't miss how Kikyou's eyes narrowed, observing the actions of our associates.

"Right, but that was a yesterday problem. What're we gonna do about the Paper Shuffle?" Karuizawa asked, clearly trying to move the conversation forward.

I took a sip of coffee, before making a decision. I had already shown I would be slightly more proactive in class, and while I wouldn't help with group tutoring there were other ways to help. At least, it would make this conversation somewhat productive.

"I'll write all the questions for the exam," I announced.

"To be honest, I did expect you to offer to do that," Horikita admitted, surprising me since I had only decided upon that course of action just then. "But I cannot allow you to be the sole person to write the questions."

"I too have a problem with this, Ayanokouji. You take action to help yourself, and I'm not satisfied leaving the exam questions in your hands. Unfortunately, I have to consider your betrayal as a possibility," Hirata bluntly said.

I was impressed by the two of them. I hadn't expected Hirata to outright state he was concerned by the thought of betrayal, and so his refusal and worry was surprising, to say the least.

"You think I'll give away our exam questions?" I asked curiously.

Hirata gave me a stony look in response. "If it gets you a personal advantage, I can't imagine you hesitating. You're a loose cannon, Ayanokouji, and while it's fine when our interests align, I can't bring myself to trust you."

That was a fair summation, I felt. It was true, that he shouldn't trust me, but right now our interests did align. The problem was, I had no way of proving that.

"A solution then. Horikita wants to help develop the questions. Yukimura, and you as well probably want to help. How about we all make 400, pass them on to Kikyou and she can select the ones she wants to. That way, Kikyou is the only person to know the questions," I proposed.

"Hey, I trust Kushida-san. I think that'd be a great idea!" Karuizawa exclaimed, backing my proposal immediately. "Honestly though, I don't see why I was brought along," she finished with a small grumble, eating another bite of her cake in the process.

"You, along with Kushida-san, are our link to the majority of our class. You two play a valuable role, Karuiawa-san," Horikita explained. "And I suppose if you insist on pressing the issue, then I'll agree to this Ayanokouji-kun. I can't deny that you know the subject matter and should be able to come up with good questions," Horikita said, acquiescing to the middle-ground idea I proposed.

Hirata let out a heavy sigh as all eyes turned to him. He took a long drink of his coffee, before putting it down on the table.

"I suppose I can go along with this. It would be foolish to waste your talents when you offer them, no matter how suspicious you seem Ayanokouji."

"Well... if you all really trust me this much, then I guess I'm happy to sort out the qustions. Woah, it's all a bit much though, my heart is racing! Hehe such a clever plan, Kiyotaka-kun, it's like we're spies," Kushida agreed with a giggle.

A slight bit of weight lifted off of all of our shoulders as one decision was made. It was slow progress, but the exam wouldn't even occur for another few weeks, and we had ages to write out the questions and submit them.

Well, we had ages if that was all we were doing. It was going to be a few very busy nights for me.

"None of this matters until we get our partners though, right?" Karuizawa asked, confused. "Like, why are we even bothering, since we don't know how they will be picked?"

And this was why I insisted on Karuizawa coming along. The perspective from an ordinary student was invaluable.

"Karuizawa-san raises a good point. All of our plans will fail if our partners are matched inefficiently," Hirata added.

"Well, it seems obvious to me that there must be a method to manipulate the system. The school wouldn't force us into an exam that was doomed from the beginning. No, there must be a method to control who is partnered with whom," Horikita astutely identified.

"Well, I'm pretty sure Chabashira-sensei said that the practice exam next week would decide our partners, so it might be based on how well we do? But there's just so many ways the school could organise that. I just don't know, and I don't want anyone to fail..." Kikyou trailed off with a depressed sigh.

"Is there even a way to check? I remember asking some senpai's from the soccer club earlier this year, and all they said was that they couldn't tell us anything," Hirata mused.

Finally, I decided to put them out of their misery. Clearly, in the information overload they had missed some important details.

"It's rather easy actually. If you had been paying attention you would know," I said.

Horikita turned to me, a prideful look in her eyes. "I listened to all the same information that you did. Are you suggesting that we missed something? Are you sure you weren't hallucinating while you looked out the window, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Obviously. 'If you think this is a mere threat, then it might be good for you to talk to an upperclassman. You should've started building connections with them, after all'. Chabashira was

practically begging us to ask for help. Clearly every year does this exam, and they can tell us the secret."

My four companions at the table sat in silence for a moment processing that information.

"Well, I guess it's a good thing you pay attention, Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyou exclaimed. "Now all we have to do is ask a senpai what to do."

"Yes, but that is something we can do later. There is still one more matter I want to discuss. I don't understand why you are insistent on keeping me from having a study group," Horikita asked Hirata.

"I thought I made my reasons perfectly clear in class, Horikita-san," Hirata coldly said, his eyes never flinching.

"You stated facts from the sports festival yesterday. I don't see why that should excuse me from my chance to redeem myself. Academically, and from experience, I am the best tutor this class has. To refuse my aid is a knowing attempt to underperform."

That was a rather dramatic way of putting it, but I couldn't ague with it. Objectively what she said was correct, but it also didn't take into account the failings of her claims. Really, all it came down to was a matter of opinion and bias, and Hirata was predisposed against her.

"The point is moot, Horikita-san, I already gave you my permission in class to lead a study group," Hirata bit back, in an exasperated tone.

"But that is exactly the problem. My study group exists only due to your decision, one that must continually be checked by you. I exhibit no authority in this scenario, and it's the same as if you were running it with me as a teaching assistant. You're not the leader of our Class Hirata-kun."

"Maybe I should be. Since we don't have an official one, maybe I should take up the position."

Hirata threw down the gauntlet.

"I won't deny that you are a capable public speaker, someone who could most certainly take a frontal role in our class. But I have yet to see you show any sign of being a leader capable of standing up to the other classes." It was an important point that Horikita brought up. Hirata was fully capable of uniting the class and getting people to follow him well enough, but he wasn't at all capable of leading our class in a special exam, not against the opponents we faced.

"And you are? You had your chance in the sports festival, Horikita-san, and we all saw how well that turned out. I still have the picture saved on my phone," Hirata nastily responded.

"Yes, I had a very good opportunity to show my talents with you

sabotaging our class," Horikita argued back.

"Please, stop arguing!" Kikyou intervened. "Can't we just try to get along for this exam?"

"Let's go outside," Horikita suggested. "I need to have words with Hirata-kun before we make any more decisions."

"I agree," Hirata said with narrowed eyes. "I can't cooperate with someone so insistent on ignoring their failings, to the point of wilfully endangering the class."

The two of them shot up from their seats, and leaving their cups behind, moved to leave the café. Karuizawa took one last bite of her cake before following quickly, leaving Kikyou and I to move at a more subdued pace.

"What's going on?" she asked quietly.

"I'm not sure, but I think you might find the end satisfying. The two of them need to clear the air before we can make any more progress," I explained. In other words, don't interfere.

Kikyou gave me a small nod of acknowledgement.

Walking out of the café, we saw Karuizawa disappear around a nearby corner, and after following her came to a curious sight.

Horikita was leaning against the wall, typing on her phone, before she shut it off and put it in her pocket. Hirata was standing not too far off, pointedly not looking in Horikita's direction.

As we got closer, Hirata turned to Karuizawa.

"It might be best if you weren't here for this," he warned. "There's nothing for you to contribute anyway. This is between me and Horikita-san."

Karuizawa looked around dubiously, but when she caught my eyes I gave a slight nod. Shrugging her shoulders, she accepted the situation.

"Alright then but let me know if you decide anything else. Like, I gotta translate it so most people understand you, right?"

She threw another concerned look towards me, before turning around and walking back the way we came from. Soon enough, it was just the four of us left. No students usually came around here, despite how close it was to the shops. I suddenly realised this was the same alley I had set up Sakura in months ago. An odd coincidence.

"Kushida-san, you can go too," Hirata suggested, but Horikita quickly cut him off.

"No, Kushida-san, please stay. I want one trustworthy person here at least, and somehow you manage to keep Ayanokouji-kun in line."

"Alright, if you insist, Horikita-san," she agreed dubiously. "But really, what's going on?"

That's right, Kushida wasn't supposed to know what was going

on, not really. I was the only person who would have a good indication of what had happened behind the scenes.

Ignoring her question, Hirata turned to face me.

"Ayanokouji, when you spoke to Chabashira-sensei, did she tell you who submitted participation tables?"

"She did."

"And?" Hirata asked impatiently.

"Both you and Horikita submitted a participation table. Oh, and Ryuuen told me that you both gave him one. He thought the entire situation was ridiculous, and couldn't help but brag."

It was important to give the second piece of information. If I had only said they both submitted a table, they could talk enough to realise I was the mastermind with a third submission. By adding in a lie from Ryuuen, I confirmed their own beliefs and forced the inevitable confrontation.

"As I thought. Hirata-kun, it's your fault that I was forced to endure that humiliation at Ryuuen's hands."

"My fault? You did the exact same thing, but I assume with much higher risk. My actions were taken to protect our classmates, while yours were taken to further your own goals," Hirata argued back, fury in his voice.

"So you would take the moral high ground? How pathetic. We both performed the same scheme as the other, but you took it a step too far," Horikita seethed.

"A step too far? You were willing to allow our classmates to come last just to give us a better chance of winning. And now you're upset because the same thing happened to you."

"You destroyed my credibility, Hirata-kun, and you wounded my pride. I'm sorry, but I can no longer cooperate with you in good faith."

"So that's it then. Things go wrong, and you turn your tail and run? I'm glad you've come to the realisation that there's no place for your radical ideals in my class, Horikita-san. I work for everyone, and you only work for yourself."

"Oh, I'm not giving up. But we are settling this matter, once and for all. We're just waiting on one more person," Horikita said with a cold smile.

At that moment, as if he had been waiting for the opportune time, Horikita Manabu walked around the corner.

"Suzune. I was surprised to get your message."

"Nii-san, thank you for coming." There was a slight flicker to her tone, but Horikita held firm, ready for the coming conflict.

"Horikita-senpai, I'm surprised to see you here. This is between me and your younger sister. I wouldn't want to bother you with

this."

Manabu's eyes flickered to me, possibly wondering why I was here as well, before he turned back to Hirata and gave him a searching look.

"Suzune asked me to come here and act as a witness. For what, I'm not sure, although I do hope my younger sister isn't wasting our time."

"Nii-san, I..." Horikita stopped and took a deep breath, before turning to Hirata. A deadly focused calm had come over her, and I couldn't help but feel excited in anticipation for whatever she asked him.

"Hirata-kun, it's now clear to me that we cannot both remain without conflict. No matter the reason, your actions have insulted my pride and I demand recompense through a challenge."

"Are you challenging me to a trial by combat?" Hirata asked, almost incredulous. I had to agree, it was a rather dramatic way to phrase her accusation.

"In the paper shuffle exam, we will compete with our scores. Whoever has the lowest individual score, regardless of our partners, will leave the school."

"Wait, Horikita-san, what are you talking about?!" Kikyou exclaimed in shock. "it sounds like you're competing to see who gets expelled, but that would be ridiculous, right?"

"No, Kushida-san, that's exactly what I mean. Whoever performs worse will drop out."

"You've mentioned multiple times that you are better academically than I am, Horikita-san. I would be stupid to take this bet," Hirata wisely answered.

"Then we will continue to have problems. No," Horikita said, holding up her hand to forestall the obvious question, "I will not intentionally cause trouble, but by our very nature and beliefs we will clash. I would see this resolved now."

No one spoke for a while, as Hirata stared at Horikita, clearly calculating, weighing the relative risks and rewards.

Finally, he came to a conclusion.

"I can see how in the future our continued presence would cause problems. You are also a disruptive influence Horikita-san, who selfishly works for her own goals at the expense of others. I won't deny it; I have considered trying to get you expelled before."

"You were already planning such a thing?" Horikita asked in surprise. I guess this had been the first time she really considered solving the problem this way, and even then, she wanted a fair competition. Horikita wasn't capable of stabbing someone in the back successfully; her strength came from her upfront talents.

"I had hoped that by exposing you as incompetent to the class, you would learn your lesson and back down before any real harm was caused. It seems that wasn't effective," Hirata noted.

"Clearly you didn't understand how much my sister values her pride," Manabu said. I could even detect a hint of pride in his voice. Clearly he respected the way she was standing back up after such an embarrassing event.

"Yes, I see that I miscalculated. Even so, Horikita-san, why should I accept your offer?"

"Because this is inevitable," Horikita concisely explained. "Eventually, we will clash and it will come at the expense of the class. I can't imagine a better chance to decide this once and for all, when the only loss is one of us. In fact, Class D is practically immune to the outcome of this, aside from losing a member."

"Manabu, what are the punishments for expulsion in this exam, or dropping out for no reason," I interrupted

The President turned to face me, along with Horikita and Hirata, and gave me a stern look.

"The punishment for the exam is expulsion, there is no more affect to the class. You already lose a member and the private points with that; the school sees no reason to take any more. As for dropping out, if it is voluntary, again there is no problem. Only expulsion due to bad behaviour will result in a demerit, but as I understand it you already have experience with such a situation," Manabu concisely answered.

"Right, I just wanted to be sure. Now I have no problem with either of them expelling the other," I said, taking a step back from the conversation.

"Wait, Kiyotaka-kun, I don't want either of them to leave! Both Horikita-san and Hirata-kun are important for the class!" Once again, Kikyou made a futile attempt to stop what was going on.

It was incredible acting. I knew she wanted Horikita expelled more than anything and was pushing every argument just not quite far enough to stop the situation, but enough to look like she cared. I had to commend that manipulation of the conversation.

"No, it's inevitable, and it's better to happen now," I reasoned. "Besides, I'm sure one of the two has more value to the class, so it's no problem to get rid of the other."

Horikita very quickly turned to Hirata.

"One more condition. Ayanokouji-kun isn't allowed to assist either of us in any way. If he does, he is also expelled."

Hirata narrowed is eyes, before throwing a quick glance towards me. I could tell Horikita was thinking about my promise from before the sports festival, that I would help whoever gave my

participation table idea. Both suspected it was the other and would happily keep me out.

"Agreed. I guess I also agree to your competition," Hirata said, sticking his hand out. Horikita quickly reached out and took it, shaking it.

"Kushida-san. Can I rely on you to ensure Ayanokouji-kun doesn't violate the rules?" Horikita asked.

"Uh, I mean sure. I don't think he was likely to do that anyway..." Kikyou said, surprised at the turn of events, or possibly shocked that Horikita was worried about the complete wrong person.

"Can I assume this is why I was called here?" Manabu asked, drawing our attention back to the older boy.

"Yes. I want you to guarantee the outcome of this bet and ask as a witness, along with ensuring the loser does in fact leave."

"I see. In that case I agree to be witness. As a matter of fact, ive been recording this entire conversation," Manabu admitted, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"Well, that makes things easy. I guess we'll see who does better then," Hirata calmly accepted.

I could tell he was happy with how the conversation had proceeded. Although he hadn't intended for this when we first met up, he was in a much better situation now. His main problem in the class, the biggest threat to the safety of his classmates and friends was placing their position at school on the line, and he was the only other person taking risks. Hirata was the type of person to take a risk for the greater good, and this situation fit him perfectly.

It would certainly be difficult, for both of them. They were quite capable, and with enough study, it wasn't ridiculous to imaging that they could get perfect scores. And even if Hirata lost, he could leave knowing that he did everything he could to protect his classmates. Horikita would leave knowing she did everything she could to live up to her brother, even though she failed. Maybe that would be the wakeup call she needed.

"What if there's a tie," I pointed out.

"In that case, the bet is canceled," Horikita suggested.

"Fine."

And with that, all lose ends were tied up.

"Wait, but aren't you worried for your sister, Horikita-senpai?" Kikyou asked.

"Suzune is her own person. She has disappointed me by being in Class D, and then embarrassed herself, and by extension humiliated me at the sports festival. What she does is her own choice," Manabu answered in a cold tone. There was no apparent love lost in their actions.

"Well... don't tell anyone, ok! People wouldn't like it if they knew that one of you was going to leave. They wouldn't study so hard, so just... keep it quiet, alright?" Kikyou practically begged at the end.

"It will be fine, Kushida-san. You've got nothing to worry about," Hirata consoled.

"There's nothing you can do anyway. By the end of semester, one of us will be gone. And it won't be me, Hirata-kun." Horikita had a fire in her eyes, barely matched by Hirata.

"Fine. We'll talk tomorrow morning again about the exam. Thank you for your help, Horikita-senpai, Kushida-san." He walked off, not even bothering to acknowledge me. I had a feeling that once he was done with Horikita, Hirata would set his sights on getting me in line. I was, after all, the next most problematic person in class.

"Thank you nii-san. I won't disappoint you this time." Horikita too left us behind, leaving me standing with Manabu and Kikyou.

"What... just happened?" Kikyou asked, fighting down a smile.

"One of them just signed their death warrant. Would you mind going ahead, Kikyou? I need to have a word with Manabu," I asked.

"Alright then. I'll see you for dinner tonight, yes?" At my agreement, Kikyou bounced off with a wave, to do whatever she did once school was over.

"You wanted a word with me, Ayanokouji?"

I turned to face Manabu, who was looking at me with a serious stare.

"If you have time, then yes. I had a few questions about the exam, but more importantly, your sister."

Authors Notes:

I was really tired when I wrote this chapter, so I have been perfecting the art of typing while I lie on the desk with my eyes shut. Ignore any spelling mistakes that came from a result of that.

And yes, I will be following the story from the LN with a few modifications. This time it is Horikita vs Hirata. I spent a long time debating whether their conflict would reach this point, because I haven't been overly clever with Ayanokouji's manipulations of them. If they talked it out, and both explained their entire stories, it would quickly unravel. In the end though, i decided that Horikita most definitely, and Hirata as well to some degree, are too proud, and at this point their clash cannot be avoided. It's a bit flimsy, but I think i've made it work.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 7 Chapter 3 - Conversations and Commiserations

I sat across from Manabu in silence. Neither of us spoke, instead staring at the other, analysing and trying to understand our goals.

Out of everyone in this school, Manabu was definitely one of the most interesting. I had a difficult time pinning him down.

He was rather straightforward, at least on the surface. He had the brains and physical talents to face his problems head on, to take on any challenges and come out ahead. I was sure he was capable of duplicity, but from what I had seen he had no need of it. He stared down his problems and dealt with it.

That was reflected in the way he handled Horikita, from the very beginning of the year. Right when they first met again, it almost came to blows when Manabu tried to force her out of school.

And again, this afternoon, there was the complete distaste, the lack of any familiar affection shown towards his sister. Manabu was willing to let her lose, to have her forced out of school to protect his reputation here. The cold, uninterested look in his eyes when the concern was brought up, when Horikita's older brother said he didn't care.

And yet, I didn't quite believe that. Because I didn't believe that he truly had no regard for his sister.

In fact, I felt it was quite the opposite.

I lifted my teacup to my lips and took a sip of the high-quality drink he had bought us.

Manabu had invited me to a tea house, which almost exclusively catered to third years. In fact, looking around, I could only see one group of second years here. Even in my explorations of the school, I had been unable to find a reason to enter without seeming suspicious. There was no rule against it, per se, but this place was the metaphorical property of the third years, a reward of sorts for surviving in the school for so long.

First years who had tried to come in uninvited had found themselves having issues not long after. The message spread fairly quickly.

Of course, I now had an excuse, an almost guaranteed pass.

Coming in with the Student Council President himself was almost a waive-all-issues pass, that I would most certainly have no problem using. Along with not being concerned by any repercussions of visiting.

Perhaps Sakayanagi might enjoy visiting. She certainly had the grace to fit in, and it would make for an interesting change in conversation venue.

"Why did you want to speak, Ayanokouji? My time is rather valuable." Manabu finally broke the silence.

I mulled over the possible conversation topics, before deciding on where to begin. Hopefully, it would lead to answers to my questions.

"Your sister is going to lose the bet," I declared bluntly.

Manabu's eyes narrowed slightly, before he took a sip of tea himself, gently placing the cup back down on the saucer in front of him.

"You seem rather confident in this outcome."

"That's because it's true. I cannot imagine a world in which she wins."

Again, Manabu took a moment to consider his response. Clearly, he was uncomfortable with the territory the conversation had moved into.

"And why are you telling me this?"

And we reached the purpose of the conversation already.

"Because I want to know if you intend to interfere." His eyes widened slightly at this, but I continued on before he could respond. "I promised to not intervene, and I have no intention of doing so. But there are plenty of other people capable of interfering. You, for instance."

"So, do you think I'm going to interfere."

I took another sip of tea, enjoying the flavour as I considered the situation.

"I think you most certainly will," I decided. "And Horikita is still going to be expelled."

"You seem to lack faith in my abilities to succeed, Ayanokouji. I admit that Hirata is a capable student, but I don't see how if I take her side, he can defeat Suzune."

I wondered if he understood where I was going for this. I knew what he planned, but what mattered was if he knew whether I did or not. If he knew I knew, then Manabu was being deliberately obstructionist in the conversation, and that didn't seem like him. No, most likely he didn't think I understood his intentions.

Of course, there was the possibility that I was completely misreading them as well.

"Please don't pretend. You intend to help Hirata win the competition, in order to expel your sister."

His shoulders sagged very slightly, and he leaned back in his chair. The imposing air of the President was suddenly gone, replaced by a tired older brother.

"So, you do understand then. I see."

"You have been very vocal this year in attempting to get your sister to leave this school," I explained. "She is an embarrassment to you, and you can't stand to see her fail any longer. And so, your conclusion is to help someone else expel her, keeping such a stain from your reputation."

"Yes, you are completely correct," Manabu admitted with a sigh. "My sister will be gone by the end of the exam."

But that wasn't something I could allow.

"Please don't interfere," I promptly asked.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise at what I said.

"You wish for me to leave the situation to play out on its own?" I could understand his confusion.

"Exactly. I'm confident, even without your interference, and my abstinence from assisting either party, the result will still be the same."

Manabu leaned forwards, his glasses glinting as they slid down his nose slightly.

"I've seen the scores for first years. Hirata is smart, but my sister has consistently outperformed him. While she is a disappointment, she is certainly capable of outscoring him on an exam," Manabu warned. Based on simple results, it certainly was the correct conclusion.

"And yet, I'm still confident Hirata will win," I claimed, ignoring his concerns completely.

Manabu took a deep drink from his tea, finishing the cup before he poured himself another from the delicate teapot between us.

"Explain yourself, Ayanokouji, and I may consider agreeing with your request. But you understand that this is a perfect opportunity. I cannot simply leave it to chance."

"You bring up a good point," I said. "Side baring for a moment, why exactly do you want your sister to leave this school. Because I have a difficult time believing what you say."

This was another thing I wanted answered. Manabu was contradictory in his actions.

"You don't believe that I wish for the disappointing embarrassment of a sibling I have to leave before she stains my legacy?"

"Not even remotely," I answered. "Because that's not the real

reason at all."

Sighing, I took a sip of tea, wetting my throat before I explained.

"Your sister most definitely isn't capable of living up to your expectations and standards. There isn't anyone who will deny that, not even Horikita. But that's not enough reason to expel her. No, you're trying to protect her." There. My theory I had been working on for a while now.

"Clearly you misunderstand my intentions, Ayanokouji."

"No, I don't think I do," I denied, cutting him off. "Your sister is definitely capable of being an ordinary student in this school, but you know she will never settle for that. She will try to emulate her hero, you, and live up to your standard, and you know that will destroy her. She will make a mistake, challenge someone like Nagumo, who is far beyond her capabilities, and you're worried you won't be around to protect her.

"You showed the same concern at the sports festival. If you hadn't come to talk to me at the sports festival, I might not have come to this conclusion at all. You let your emotions control you and you made a mistake."

I took a moment of silence, letting him process my words, before delivering the final blow.

"As an older brother, you love her, and are doing what you think is best to help and protect her, by getting her from this dangerous environment as safely as possible. But at the same time, you don't wish for anyone to know that the Student Council President, leader of Class 3-A, was the one to force his sister out of school. And it's for that exact reason why you cannot interfere."

Having finished my argument, I sat back in silence, finishing the remnants of my tea. Manabu needed time to think through my arguments, because if I was correct, I suspected that he may not have even recognised the deeper conclusion himself.

Realising I had finished my tea, I poured the last remaining tea from the tea pot into my cup, savouring the warmth and the relaxing smell that came with it.

"You make an interesting argument, Ayanokouji. Yes, it is possible that I am trying to spare Suzune from the worst of this school, because I know she isn't capable. That doesn't explain why I shouldn't interfere with the competition. I can keep any actions I take hidden."

I tilted my head slightly in confusion.

"Haven't you realised yet? She respects you above all others. That's why she asked for you to be the impartial judge. You cannot be the reason that she loses. After the faith she placed in you to at least let her fight her own battles, having it shattered would destroy

her."

"You say this as if you care. I know you don't Ayanokouji. People are chess pieces to you, moving to the most optimal positions for your selfish desires."

And there it was, the problem with my argument. I didn't have a strong rebuttal, but I could make some vague arguments that would hopefully be enough for Manabu to accept.

"I have a vested interest in seeing your sister leave the school," I finally admitted. "And while I cannot interfere directly, there was no rule against informing others about the bet. Rest assured, there are enough people who would be willing to help Hirata win after the embarrassment Horikita put our class through."

"As well, I would be in your debt for securing the situation without my involvement being known."

I gave him a bored stare. "I thought that was a given. No student wants to be known as the one who forced their sibling out of this school. You can do without the stain on your reputation."

Manabu sat for a while, weighing up the possibilities of the situation.

"You can guarantee the result without interfering yourself?" he finally asked.

"Both Horikita and Hirata are exceptional students, but neither of them is capable of thinking creatively enough to win. Fortunately, I know of a person both devious enough to help one side win, whilst simultaneously understanding the position I was in and acting on their own. Of course, such a situation is hypothetical, after all, and I can't be held responsible for the actions of another person. You wouldn't consider it a rule violation to simply inform a friend of the situation, would you?" I asked.

"No," Manabu said with reluctance. "I don't see a problem with that."

He stood up, taking another deep drink and finishing his second cup of tea.

"I will consider your proposal, Ayanokouji, but do not expect me to be an ally."

"That's all I can ask," I answered. Manabu, upon receiving my agreement didn't waste a moment and walked right out.

I watched Manabu leave, before returning to drinking the last remnants of my tea, thinking over the conversation we had just had.

I didn't care about the mental health of either Horikita, or the bond of siblings that would be broken. I hadn't come to respect Horikita at all this year, and I had no intention of helping them out in any way. That had simply been a convenient excuse that

Manabu, in his emotional state I forced him into, had been willing to accept.

No, if I was going to manipulate the situation correctly, I needed to prevent external influence possibly interfering with my plans. I already had some developing in my mind, and for them to work I couldn't have Manabu making his own. That would only serve to cause unneeded chaos.

No, if Manabu stayed out, then everything would be much simpler. Even if I wasn't allowed to participate.

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I finally returned to my dorm quite late in the afternoon, my bag weighing heavily on my shoulder. It had been a long day, not what I had been expecting right after the sports festival, but I couldn't help feeling excited for the intellectual challenge looming ahead.

Walking through the door into my room, I could see night beginning to fall through the window at the other end of my dorm, the last rays slowly fading away as the sun slipped beyond the horizon.

And there, lying on my bed still in her undersized school uniform, long shapely legs stretched out was my partner in crime Kikyou. A satisfied smirk was firmly stuck on her face, and when she heard me come in, I watched as she dropped her phone, forgetting whatever it was she had been doing and jumped up, a fire in her eyes.

"She's going to leave the school! She's going to leave the school!"

I dropped my bag down next to my desk and watched as she bounded around the room, repeating the phrase over and over in a song-like fashion.

"You're excited," I observed.

Kikyou bounced over to me, grabbing my hands in hers.

"She's going to be gone! This is what we've been waiting for, for her to make a mistake. And she made a massive fucking mistake!"

"It's certainly a risky move," I admitted. "Although, it could pay off for her, and get rid of Hirata."

Kikyou rolled her eyes and collapsed back onto the comfy chair.

"Please. As if you're gonna let that happen."

I moved into the kitchen and began getting things out of the fridge. Tonight was a celebratory dinner, at least a celebration for the chance Horikita had provided, and it wouldn't hurt to make Kikyou's favourite.

"Steak?"

"You do know how to treat a girl," she answered with a slight purr in her voice.

I had spent a bit extra on a couple of eye fillets when shopping two days ago. I had thought to have them after the sports festival,

but in the end I had decided I was too tired to enjoy them properly.

It seemed that had turned out for the best anyway.

A light slathering of olive oil and some spices, and two eye fillets were sizzling away in a frypan on my stove.

While I cooked, Kikyou had followed me into the kitchen and jumped up to sit on the bench.

"So?"

"What? I'm cooking dinner. You could help," I suggested.

Kikyou let out a low growl. "What's your plan?"

"My plan?"

"Your plan to make sure Hirata wins and Horikita leaves!" she almost shouted in frustration and anticipation.

"What plan?" I asked confused. "You were there. I'm not allowed to help either one of them."

I pulled out a couple of plates and took the steaks off the frypan now that both sides had been lightly seared, leaving the inside still lightly bloody and tender.

"Yeah, but you're not actually going to follow that, right?" Kikyou dismissed, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Actually, I think I will."

I poured a light drizzle of mint sauce onto both steaks, followed by a small amount of basil. There was still something missing though. It couldn't be mayonnaise, as much as I wanted to add some, I was worried Kikyou would yell at me again. Apparently, she didn't understand that mayonnaise made everything better. I had yet to come across a food that wasn't improved by it.

"What?" Her voice came out as a low whisper.

Ah, I forgot to make any broccoli. Well, it was looking to be a rather small dinner, without much variety, but I could live with that. This was the best steak the school had to offer, after all, and I wasn't going to risk ruining my pallet with random stuff in my fridge.

"You said you'd help me. You promised you'd get rid of Horikita."

"Yes, I did," I admitted. It had been months since the day on the cruise ship, just before we got on the island, but I stood by my promise.

"And now, now that there is finally a chance, you're going to let it go?" She accused, her voice raising louder with every word. "You've been orchestrating this for months! Ever since we were on the island, you've been laying hints, starting arguments, setting things up! I've watched you edge them on to collide, and now they finally do, and you won't take the chance to expel her?!"

"I promised not to get involve," I reaffirmed.

"No. No you promised me, first, that you'd help get rid of her. Did

you forget? Is that it? Are... are you done with me now?" she finished, her voice trailing off quietly at the last words.

I turned around to face the girl. She'd jumped down from the bench opposite from where I was cooking, and was staring up at me, a multitude of mixed emotions showing in her eyes.

Fear, anger, excitement, confusion, all mixed into one and she wasn't sure how to handle them. Kikyou's cheeks were flushed, and she was breathing heavily from her rant, but her face was close to collapse.

Gently, leaving our meals forgotten for the moment, I lifted a hand and reached out to gently caress her cheek.

"I haven't forgotten my promise," I said softly. "And don't for one second think that I'm done with you."

The moment my hand made contact, her emotions soothed, a calming nature taking over. The flush of anger disappeared, to be replaced by a light pink dusting. But it was in her eyes I could tell that she was focused, called back down into the situation, the rush of emotions no longer clouding her words and judgement.

"She needs to go... I need her to be gone. She knows, she knows my secret, I just know it and I need her gone Kiyotaka... please."

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "Everything is going to fall into place. And by the end, Horikita will be gone."

"You're sure?" she whispered, almost unsure as if the situation was real. "You promise, even if you don't help?"

I ran my thumb across her cheek soothingly, brushing the corner of her lips as I did so.

"Everything is in place. Every tool that is needed is ready, and if everything goes according to plan, you will be the one to beat Horikita."

"Me?" There was a note of disbelief in her voice.

"You. It seems fitting, does it not? I can't help, not actively, but I will ensure you have everything you need. It will be down to you to make and execute the plan though."

Kikyou has grown far too attached to me in the past months. While that had been my intention, I needed for her to also remain independent, capable of thinking on her own. That was what made her so valuable. Early in the year, if a situation like this had arisen, she would have handled it marvellously, without my assistance being needed at all.

But now, after months of seeing me work, and helping me in my plans, she had grown sloppy and lazy, content to let me direct her actions. This would be a good reminder of her own agency, that she too was smart, smart enough to defeat Horikita herself. And in the event that she failed, I would interfere, saving her from herself and

tying her to me even closer.

"You really think I can do it? After so long, it almost feels like a dream. School without Horikita, and the threat she poses. I almost can't imagine it."

"You are more than capable," I reassured her. "Horikita is rather inept, and has no concept of planning cleverly, at least not to your degree. You are far more devious than her."

A smile broke out on Kikyou's face, and she reached up and took the hand on her cheek, squeezing it for a moment before stepping back and letting our hands fall apart.

"I am pretty nasty," Kikyou grinned with renewed confidence. "And you're the only one who knows."

"I feel so honoured," I answered dryly. Picking up the two plates of dinner I left the kitchen and moved towards the table. "Can you grab some water?"

Hearing an affirmative, I sat down at the table, shortly followed by Kikyou carrying two glasses of water.

"So," Kikyou announced, holding her glass up. "To the end of Horikita," she declared.

I tapped her glass with mine and returned it to the table.

"Don't get overconfident," I warned her. "You haven't won yet."

"No, but you think I have a chance. That's good enough for me. I'm not going to miss my opportunity to get rid of a threat," Kikyou promised, before digging into her steak.

"How will you feel?" I asked. "The biggest threat to your compulsive need to learn people's secrets will be gone. You've been planning and dreaming about it for months, and now you actually have a chance."

Kikyou swallowed her bite, before taking a drink of water. Clearly, she wasn't sure how to answer the question.

"I'm not sure," she finally answered. "I guess that's why I reacted so dramatically earlier. So excited, and then crushed when I thought it wouldn't happen. Like you said I've been dreaming of it for so long, I honestly don't know."

That was the sort of answer I had expected. For someone who was had the opportunity to remove the only obstacle to their goal for the next three years, it had to be a scary feeling. Afraid to dream it was possible, and yet it was closer than ever before. Kikyou was in an especially dangerous emotional state, and it would fall to me to ensure she didn't make a mistake, to keep her on the right path.

"It was pretty funny how everyone seemed to trust me though," she added with a laugh. "Like, sure, I see why no one trusts you. Only an idiot would expect you to help them for no reason, but I had so much trouble trying not to laugh when Horikita asked me to

make sure you didn't cause any problems."

"It was amusing," I admitted. "Although I suppose that means you've done your job properly. Even the people you hate are willing to rely on you."

"That's true," she mused. "Still, if anyone had given a reason to cause problems it was me, and you're the only person who can supposedly control me."

Kikyou let out a snort. "If only that was possible. You do whatever you want, there's nothing I can do to stop you."

"Still, it's a handy cover," I decided. "If people think that you can stop me causing worse situations, they're more likely to be thankful to you for my actions, if you can explain it as you advising me."

"That's what I've already been doing," she admitted. "Your participation, and being helpful, I've been complaining to people at how difficult it was to get you to do that."

"Clever, although I would expect nothing less." A smug smile returned to her face at the compliment, along with the light dusting on her cheeks.

"What did you talk to the President about?" Kikyou asked, changing the topic.

"I convinced him not to help." Kikyou froze for a moment. Clearly she hadn't considered other external interference, and expected Manabu to want to help his sister. "He was willing to consider thinking about it. Some garbage about letting her grow into her own and fight by herself may have convinced him."

A relieved sigh escaped from Kikyou as I said this.

"Thank God. I didn't want to be going up against him to get Horikita expelled. Even if you did help, it would get messy, and then you'd actually be risking having to leave the school as well."

Yes, that was the truth. No matter what happened, I wouldn't leave this school. No matter what I had to sacrifice. Reasonable risks were acceptable, but there was nothing I wouldn't do, or betray, even Kikyou, if it meant the difference between my expulsion or survival. I was quickly coming to enjoy my time here, and wasn't ready to let it go.

Authors Notes

So, this is my head canon for Manabu, because as an older brother, I can't comprehend being so cruel to a sibling without here being a reason based on love. This chapter is dedicated to my favourite sibling, who no matter what, I will always love and do my best to help, misguided as it might be sometimes.

My beta wasn't sure about Kushida in this chapter, but I'm pretty happy with how I've written her. She's a strong person, with her

real personality, but I feel that she's quite attached to Ayanokouji now, and since the basis of that relationship was the agreement to expel Horikita, it would have a rocky moment when he refused to help. What do you think?

Finally got around to reading Y2V6. Really fucking good, short but damn that ending. I'm hyped to read the rest of this year.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 7 Chapter 4 - Beginning Our Assault

The next few days were defined by a constant flurry of messages. I had never gotten so much use out of a group chat before.

I had been in the class group chat before, and a couple of others, but I had never bothered to say anything. If I had something to say, an individual message was more effective, but speaking in person was always best. And on the afternoon of the sports festival I was added into a lot more, but I had continued to ignore them.

It was the group chat containing Horikita, Hirata, Yukimura, Kikyou, Karuizawa and myself that I actually used. While Yukimura didn't know what was going on, and could sense the tension as we planned, he was tactful enough not to bring it up.

I had been told by Kikyou that he privately admitted to her that he didn't care about the spat between Horikita and Hirata, as long as they continued to cooperate and make progress in our planning as we were.

And surprisingly, despite their challenge and ultimatum, Hirata and Horikita both had the decorum to act reasonably, and while they clearly didn't enjoy cooperating, and numerous arguments had broken out between them, they were never over serious issues. When it came to major decisions in planning for the exam, they were capable of putting aside their differences and grudgingly agree.

Most of that came from them having the exact same ideas, as much as they didn't want to admit it. This was an exam wherein the only way we could protect our classmates was to succeed and crush our opponents in the most effective way possible, meaning both Hirata and Horikita would be united in their objectives.

Obviously, they didn't enjoy such cooperation. In fact, most of the problems came from the same debate of who was going to take the lead and inform the class of the decisions made. They both obstinately refused to let the other do it, nor share the responsibility.

In the end, everyone else convinced them to do it together, since a united front would put people to rest.

Hirata had gone off directly after his confrontation with Horikita to talk to some of his senpai friends, in order to find out the best way to approach the exam. He reported back to us much the same

that I found from my own investigation, and it was rather simple to come up with a strategy.

And so, it was on Friday when Horikita and Hirata both walked up to the front of the class, and after some embarrassing jostling to try and be the one to stand behind the podium, Hirata emerged victorious, with Horikita relegated to standing by his side.

"I know a lot of you have been asking questions about the special exam, and the practice test coming up on Monday. As Kushida-san pointed out, it was best for us to retreat and consider the situation, before reporting back and explaining how we will overcome it." Hirata began strong.

"For now, we have decided several of us will be writing questions for the exam, to be compiled by Kushida-san. That way, she is the only person who knows what our questions are, and we won't have another incident like at the sports festival. I'm sure we can all agree that Kushida-san is trustworthy enough for this role."

There were some afirmatives muttered across the room, and not one person seemed to argue against it. Even if they had some personal slight, there wasn't a valid reason to deny this plan.

"Thank you for your trust in me! I hope I won't let everyone down!" Kikyou stood up and promised with a bow, nervous but thankful smile on her face.

"I'm sure you won't, Kushida-san," Hirata reassured her, giving her a smile. It was very rare to see Hirata smile these days.

"The other topic of conversation we need to cover is in regard to the practice test and the selection of partners," Horikita began, taking her turn to speak. "I'm sure many of you are concerned with not scoring well enough, or getting a partner who won't score well enough, however, we believe we know how to solve that problem."

"And do you think we're going to follow your plan again Horikita-san? It went so well at the sports festival after all," Shinohara taunted with a cruel smile.

But Horikita wasn't perturbed, having expected a reaction like this.

"This isn't just my plan. The suggestion came from Hirata-kun after he talked to some senpai's about the exam. This isn't the first year it has been done, and apparently partners are sorted in the exact same method every time. Using this, we can manipulate our pairings for the most desirable outcomes."

This had a more positive response than Horikita's previous words, as the entire class seemed excited at the chance to minimise their risks. Of course, there was still caution in everybody's minds.

"You're certain about this?" Matsushita asked. "I'm not doubting the information, but are you both sure that it won't change this

year?" It was an important distinction Matsushita had made in her question, so it didn't appear as if she was doubting our leaders. That would be the biggest issue at this time.

"Of course, there is no way to be sure, but this is the best idea we have. Plus, Chabashira-sensei suggested that we talk to older students when the exam was announced. I see no alternative to this plan." Horikita effortlessly explained.

Matsushita nodded along with the answer to her question. "Right, I agree with you. I just wanted to be sure." I could see other people nodding as well, now understanding that we had no better option.

If it were anyone else, I would have suspected they were lying to cover up their lack of understanding. As it was, I thought Matsushita was doing a terrific job helping the class to relate to and understand the information being presented, just as I had asked her to.

"Wait, so what even is this method of rigging the exam? 'Cause we only got this weekend to prepare now." As usual, Sudou was trying to work out the minimum amount of studying required to pass.

"You don't have to worry about a thing, Sudou," Horikita stated with a smug smile. "The special exam we have on Monday will match the best performing students with the worst for the Paper Swap exam. Say, for instance, Sudou got zero marks on the practice exam, you would be matched with someone who got the opposite, in this case one hundred, or the closest result. This gives us a chance to control who is partnered with whom."

"We've come up with a plan," Hirata interrupted, pulling the spotlight back, "that should guarantee everyone a partner where your average score will be high enough. It will be the most dangerous for the average scoring students in the class, but with the right tutoring every pair should be able to have an average score of fifty between you. That will be enough to surmount any expulsions."

Suddenly, Hasebe stood up from her seat, a concerned look on her face.

"Horikita-san, Hirata-kun, there's thirty-seven students in our class. What... what happens to the odd person out?"

A grimace formed on the faces of Hirata and Horikita, along with everyone else who had been involved with the planning at one point or another and heard the debates.

Some concerned voices broke out, and several of my classmates began to yell in their newly worried state. It took the combined efforts of Hirata and Kikyou to calm everyone down.

"We have considered this already. It... wasn't an easy situation,

and since some people weren't being cooperative and offering their skills," Horikita shot me a frustrated glare when Hirata said this, "Yukimura-kun has volunteered himself to do his best to score perfectly on the practice test and pass the Paper Swap alone. It won't be easy, but a score of 90% or higher should be enough to guarantee he passes."

Silence filled the room at this declaration, at the idea that someone was volunteering to take such a risk. Yukimura, to stave off conflicts and worries, had volunteered to score perfectly and take the test alone.

I thought back to the day when the idea was first brought up. It had been two days ago when someone other than myself had realised the problem in the situation. Hirata had been the one to do so, and quickly he and Kikyou had disappeared, contacting as many of their senpai friends as possible to find a solution.

Soon enough, with the concern, we had learned that the practice test was extraordinarily easy. This made sense on reflection, as it was a chance to mess up the pairings and doom some pairs to fail. Once we knew that it would be easy enough to manipulate our scores in the practice exam, the planning was simple.

Instead of having ten people score as perfectly as possible, with at least 90%, and pairing them with the worst in our class who would do nothing on the test, we no longer had that luxury.

The person who scored the highest and didn't have a matching partner would be forced to take the test alone. It was a small mercy the school gave, but it was something we could control.

The first suggestion was that I score the highest, but I shot that idea down as quickly as possible. I was already taking a risk by being one of the top scorers, and while I could guarantee my safety in answering every question, there was always a chance that our class would score well enough to raise the threshold beyond what was possible to be met by a single person.

With a choice between certain safety and almost certain safety, I decided to remain resolute and partner up with someone.

Eventually, Yukimura volunteered to be the one to take the risk, to stop the ever-growing argument between Horikita and Hirata, with the agreement that he wouldn't have to tutor too many more people, needing time to study himself.

"You're really brave to do this, Yukimura-kun. Thank you for taking the risk for the class!" Kikyou praised him in front of everyone, turning his cheeks slightly pink from embarrassment.

"Eh, well I didn't do much at the sports festival, and this is the way I can help, so I'm happy to do so." He hadn't seemed so happy about it when it was first suggested but being praised by a cute girl

in front of the class was bound to have an effect.

"Everyone, please remember that Yukimura will be trying to score 100 on the practice test. That means, to ensure he isn't partnered up, no one can score zero. You all need to get at least one mark." There were some snorts at that, but nobody made any comments. They were still in awe of the bravery on display.

There were some more supporting cries coming from our classmates, but once again, Horikita and Hirata pulled us back on track. They were working surprisingly well together, although it was clear every time one of them spoke that the other was frustrated and angry.

"There is one more thing to discuss," Horikita called out, bringing the room back to near silence. "I'm sure you'll all agree that our target should be Class C. I for one want to get some revenge on Ryuuen for the sports festival," she said with a cold smile.

And despite what reservations our class had towards Horikita, to her poor showing in the sports festival and the subsequent humiliation that the whole school saw, everyone wanted to get back at Ryuuen for his poisoning tactics.

"I'm glad we're all in agreement with that then," Hirata finished. "We will send everyone a message of how well you should try to score, to do our best at getting good partners. Once we know our partners and the class we're against, we'll organise some study groups then."

And with that, our homeroom was over for the day.

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I sat in my room with three boys from my class. I could already tell this exam would be a test in patience for letting people visit me.

I had invited Sotomura, Ijuuin and Okitani to my room on Sunday afternnon, and they were surprisingly well behaved. Well, I had expected that from Sotomura. He and I got along to some degree, but the other two boys were known for being rambunctious, almost to the degree of Ike and Yamauchi. This quiet, nearly fearful attitude was unusual.

Perhaps they had decided that I could expel people on a whim, and didn't want to be forced out of the school if they got on the wrong side of me. That would explain the hesitation when they arrived at my door.

I handed each of them a can of soft drink, and sat down in the comfy chair across from where they were sitting in a line on the ground.

"Thank you for coming."

"You said you had a way for us to earn points. I wasn't going to ignore that," Okitani admitted.

"Yeah! We can always use more private points," Ijuuin exclaimed.

"My compatriots speak the truth, Ayanokouji-dono. The absence of private points in my life is truly problematic."

I took a moment to adjust to the presence of such odd people. They were very different to the people I usually associated with.

"Yes, I have a deal for you." I reached over to my desk and picked up three stacks of paper. "This was rather expensive to print, so don't lose them."

I handed a different stack to each of them, and they began to look them over.

"These... these are exam questions," Okitani realised. "Did you write them?"

"Hey, mine are different!" Ijuuin noticed. "What's the deal here, Ayanokouji?"

"All three of you have ten copies of exam questions," I explained. "Each stack is different, and none of them are going to be used on our written exam. Once it's announced which Class we are targeting, I want you three to try and sell them these exam papers. Pretend you're willing to betray the class for enough points, and make sure you sell them to different people."

I thought it was likely that we would end up being paired against Class C. Ryuuen had a target painted on us, and he wouldn't be satisfied with the results from the sports festival. Sakayanagi wanted to claim Class A again, and Kanzaki would respond to her.

These three boys selling exam papers won't get much done, not obviously. No one in their right mind would purchase a paper from them, trusting it to be the questions, even if they said they got them from me. There might be a few people who did, but the real benefits would come from Ryuuen.

I had written hundreds and hundreds of questions in the past few days. It would seem almost inconceivable not to reuse them, at least similar styles, while writing these bait exam sheets. There was every chance that Ryuuen would purposefully buy a copy and use them to study, at least trying to get a glimpse of the questions I would come up with.

"All you need to do is quietly, without mentioning each other, go around the students of Class C and try to make them buy these. Say you don't care about the class points, and you just want private points to yourself. Charge around 5000 but be open to negotiation. I'll match any sale you make, so you'll get double whatever you sell them for."

That would be a good motivation to make them try. Of course, I thought it was likely that they might try dumping the exams and claiming they solved them all, but a significant effort wasn't

unreasonable to expect.

"And this will help the class as well?" Okitani asked curiously.

"Yeah. This is the best way you can help. Try to trick some of the other students into not studying, so we can hopefully beat them."

"You're saying we have the opportunity to be useful?" Ijuuin realised, swelling up slightly.

And this was the difference between these boys and Yamauchi. They weren't blind to their faults, and how little they had contributed to the class. While they weren't proud of it, they were capable of admitting all they had done so far was struggle along, contributing nothing. I was offering them a chance to be useful, to make valid contributions to the class.

And all three of them seemed receptive enough to the idea.

"A truly marvellous strategy, Ayanokouji-dono. Your deceptive and devious nature knows no bounds."

"Sure." A lot of the time it was best to just agree with or ignore Sotomura.

There was a knock on the door. It seemed my next guest was early, so I left them there for now, taking time to finish addressing the three boys here.

"Don't do anything until after our opponent has been announced, and even then wait a few days. Don't let anyone in the class know what you're doing either, it will make it seem more legitimate if you are caught. And do it slowly," I warned them. This didn't have to go fantastically, but it needed to work to some degree for a certain action to happen.

"Don't worry, Ayanokouji. We'll do our part," Okitani promised with a relaxed smile.

"Yes, it truly is an honour to be involved in another of your schemes!" Sotomura proclaimed, forgetting we had company, and drawing the attention of the two boys beside him.

"Another?" Ijuuin asked.

"Never mind." I cut them off, hearing the person at the door knock again. "Don't lose the exams. I have to talk to someone else now." I was lucky my next guest wasn't Kouenji, because although I wanted to talk to him, I doubted he'd stay for a second knock, if I could even get him to show up at my room.

Recognising the dismissal, the three boys got up, leaving their soda cans on the ground and tromped to the door, and after putting their shoes back on, opened it and brushed past Matsushita on their way out. I couldn't be bothered by the fact that they didn't say goodbye or clean up their mess. Getting their cooperation was more important than being pedantic, and it wasn't as if I wanted their friendship.

"Interesting company." Matsushita looked amused, watching them walk down the hall and to the elevator. "You need better friends."

"I was just thinking that" I mused. "It's probably a good thing that they aren't my friends then."

Matsushita let out a laugh and entered my dorm, closing the door behind her and taking off her shoes.

"Excuse me."

"Take a seat. Tea?" I offered.

"If it's not too much trouble," Matsushita accepted, gracefully taking a seat on my bed.

Moving into the kitchen, I prepared two cups of tea, returning with them a few minutes later. Matsushita gratefully took the offered teacup and saucer.

"So," she asked after taking a sip. "Why did you want to see me?"

"I didn't want to have this conversation in messages," I admitted. "It's not overly suspicious, but I prefer to speak face to face."

"Then I suppose we agree on that."

We sat in silence, slowly drinking tea while I consolidated my thoughts. Matsushita was an interesting student, a bit of a wild card. She didn't particularly have a place in my plans, but she also wasn't worthless.

"We spoke on the summer holidays about your grades. You told me that Matsushita was going to start improving."

This was back at the pool after Matsushita had secured the recording footage from the remote control car.

"I remember. There were a number of interesting revelations that day," Matsushita confirmed without giving anything away.

"Have your grades been improving enough to lead a study group?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I most definitely could take one, but whether people would believe that it was the result of hard work is another thing altogether."

It would be strange for someone with slightly above average grades to suddenly be capable of leading a study and tutoring group.

"The problem is we don't have enough tutors. Horikita will take a group, as will Hirata and Kikyou. Yukimura will take on a couple of decently academic people that probably don't need to be tutored anyway, and by then we've gone through everyone who can tutor."

"Mii-chan could," Matsushita pointed out.

"She certainly is smart enough to understand all the content, but I'm not confident in her ability to teach others," I explained. "I'd expect her to work with Hirata, who will probably have a huge group, and act as an aid. No, since I can't be bothered, you'll have

to help."

"But like you said, it would seem strange for me to suddenly be able to lead a tutor group," Matsushita mused. It was a tricky situation, but I was trying to give her the ability to broaden her connections.

"How about as a group study session. No main tutor, but your friends know you've been improving in your studies. Take them through stuff and help out, but never act as a tutor yourself."

"It's definitely a good idea," she admitted. "What you described is basically the same as tutoring, but as long as I never obviously try to fill that role, it will seem like just a group study session, where I'm learning slightly ahead of the class to improve myself. I think I could make that work."

"As long as you think you can manage it. Everyone has a role to play, even those boys."

"And what did you have them doing? Because that was some pretty heavy paperwork you gave them," Matsushita asked with a smirk.

"Disruption tactics to improve our chances, although I might've ruined their chance of ever being trusted again by anyone again."

"A noble sacrifice. I'm sure it will be worth it," Matsushita said with a smirk. Finishing her tea, she placed the saucer and teacup down on the bed. "If that's all, I'll be going then. Apparently, I have a study group to organise."

"Thank you for helping, Matsushita."

"It's no trouble. You're already managing so much, I'm happy to help out. And thank you for the tea," she said, moving to the door and putting her shoes on. "I'm sure that everyone will get through this."

"Yes, I see no reason to think otherwise," I agreed.

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It was Monday morning when I finally got to meet with Kouenji. He was waiting in the lobby of the dormitory when I arrived, and moved to join me as we headed towards school.

"Today is a rather splendid day, is it not?"

Looking around, I could hardly disagree. The sun was out, and there wasn't a cloud in sight. It wasn't swelteringly hot either, but a normal warmth, surprisingly nice considering we were heading towards winter.

"It is. I'm sure that will have a good effect on our minds as we do the test today."

We walked along in silence, as Kouenji combed his hair, looking at it from a pocket mirror to ensure it was styled correctly. The moment he was happy with it, he snapped the mirror shut, and it

disappeared into his pocket, along with the comb.

"I'm sure you're curious as to whether I will be participating in your little scheme."

"It would be helpful if you did, but I can't force you," I admitted. Kouenji did what he wanted.

"No, but I thought I would be generous enough to provide you with the opportunity to convince me."

"Doesn't that mean you want to be convinced in the first place, or you have an indication that you will participate anyway?"

"No, it simply makes me blameless in the event that I do not participate and your plan is ruined. I now gave you the opportunity to convince me, so if I do not participate, that is your failing, and I am completely blameless."

That was some very convoluted logic, but it made just enough sense that I had to take it seriously.

"Fine. What would motivate you to score 99 on the test." We had to avoid getting full marks so as to not waste Yukimura's sacrifice.

"I suppose a challenge is in order. Truly, I don't see the chance to compete ourselves in a test. But I am curious as to how well you can teach someone."

Instantly his plan made sense.

"You want us to partner with the worst students and see who can raise someone's grades the most."

"As expected of you, Ayanokouji-boy, you figured it out. I doubt you have ever had the experience of teaching before."

"You're right, it's something I've never done."

"Then you agree? Because otherwise I shall score nothing and be paired with our sacrificial little lamb." It was a threat, I realised.

"Don't worry, I'm more than happy to make that deal. I was already prepared to privately tutor my partner anyway, so it makes no difference to me."

Nothing more needed to be said, and soon enough we arrived at class, taking our respective seats.

Soon enough, Chabashira walked in. There was a nervous air, as even though we were prepared it was still a test to be taken.

"We will begin shortly, but I'd like to say something. You nominated Class C as the class you wanted to attack for this test. Class A did as well, but you won the lottery, and the right to target them. Class C chose to target you in response, and by elimination Class A and B will target each other."

While I hadn't expected Class A to want to target Class C again, everything had turned out alright. A sigh of relief blew through the class upon hearing that we could have our revenge.

"Very well, since you don't seem to have any questions, we should

get started. You all seem to be fairly confident about this," Chabashira noticed critically, at the smiles and relaxed attitude of our classmates.

"We're well prepared for this, sensei," Hirata answered seriously.

"Very well then." An approving smile flickered on Chabashira's face, and she walked around the room handing out the exams.

And just as planned, it was easy enough for everyone in the class to manipulate their scores to the level required.

Authors Notes:

Something that i haven't seen adressed before is what happens if there is an odd number in the Paper Swap exam. It's mentioned in the books, but never fleshed out, so this is my take on how it would go down.

As always, hope you enjoyed!

Arc 7 Chapter 5 - The Rooftop

The next day Chabashira returned with the results for our practice exam.

Things had mostly gone as planned, and while there were a few pairs in the average scorers of the class that would have difficulty, all the worst students had been successfully matched up with the best.

Horikita had been paired with Sudou, I had been paired with Karuizawa, Kouenji had been paired with Satou, Kikyou had been paired with Inogashira.

And Yukimura was on his own, bravely soldiering on.

The class was abuzz with the revelation of our partners, and finally, we could begin to organise into study groups properly. The Paper Swap end of semester exams were only a couple of weeks away now, and many of my classmates seemed eager to get stuck into their study.

And so, once the day was over, I found myself dragged away by Kikyou to the roof of the school building. I was surprised to find it quiet at this time of day, but I was more interested in our reason to be up here, so I let the previous thought go.

Walking out, I stopped not far from the door, standing in place, while Kikyou walked over and leant against the railing, looking out across from the school.

Since I had nothing important to do this afternoon, having planned to not start studying with Karuizawa until tomorrow, I simply stood, waiting curiously while I filtered through possibilities in the back of my mind, specifically for Class A and B.

"So?"

"So."

Kikyou stared at me with a bored expression, leaning against the railing of the roof, her hair flicking lightly in the wind.

"I can't be bothered playing your little word games right now. What's the plan to deal with Horikita?"

"You're in an upset mood I see."

"I'm going to have to tutor the lowest of the low for the next few weeks," Kikyou growled. "I'm not particularly happy to have it become real."

"You won't be taking the worst students," I reasoned. "Horikita and Hirata will do that, probably. You'll just get the slightly below average ones."

"You know, sometimes I envy you and your ability to get out of doing things just by acting like a prick, completely aloof of our problems."

"Really?"

"Of course not. I couldn't live like you," Kikyou laughed, finding such a consideration illaudable.

"No, you couldn't. And I would struggle to do what you do," I admitted. I was simply incapable of matching Kikyou's talents. I was perfectly capable of setting up an information network, which was what I had done by befriending her. Making friends like she did was simply impossible for me.

"Inogashira isn't too bad of a partner though, right?"

Kikyou let out a sigh, tilting her head up to look at the sky.

"No, she's not so bad. She's quiet, and I'm pretty sure I can tutor her to a reasonable level. I just wish I didn't have to risk myself so much."

I tilted my head slightly in confusion.

"Why are you at risk?"

"Uh, because I'm pretty smart, and I can probably get 80%, but Inogashira isn't great. There's a chance I can still get expelled." That last sentence came out as a whisper, as if she had only just realised it.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Her eyes shot to me a look of confusion and frustration mixed together.

Stepping forward, I reached out and gently took her cheek, tilting Kikyou's face until it was facing mine.

"Don't think I'm leaving anything to chance," I said softly. "The only thing I can't control is who wins the stupid bet, and I'm leaving that to you."

A shuddering sigh escaped Kikyou, who suddenly and unexpectedly pulled me in to a hug, pressing herself against me, her head resting on my chest.

"I'm sorry. It's just... this is the chance I've been waiting for. For so long, I've had to live with that looming shadow, the threat of Horikita. And now... it honestly doesn't seem real."

"And you don't want to get too distracted and end up having to leave the school yourself," I deduced.

Kikyou looked up at me, a brilliant smile adorning her face.

"Exactly!"

She stepped back and took a deep breath.

"I don't see what you're worried about anyway. The exam won't be easy, but you and Inogashira shouldn't have any trouble."

"I know. It's just, Chabashira-sensei said that last year the cutoff was 700 marks. If Inogashira doesn't get anything, I'll need to get almost 90% to do that, and if Class C is writing the exam to be as hard as possible, I don't think I can."

"No, this is definitely going to be one of the most difficult exams we've ever done. The school expects everyone to score at least thirty, and teachers usually write exams that are much easier than they could possibly make them. With Class C out to get us, I can imagine some of the intelligent questions some of their students will write."

"Exactly. I can get 60 on each exam probably easily enough, so that barrier is cleared. But with a total of around 700 out of 1600 between the two of us, it seems quite a high number."

I stepped back, moving to the center of the roof, and listening to the tapping of students as they moved below us, the people walking by, heading home for the day, or to the mall, or however they wanted to hang out.

"You aren't my only contact you know. I have other people who owe me favours."

"I don't doubt it. You seem to get around enough without my help," Kikyou bitterly agreed.

"Actually, a lot of that came from when we swapped phones on the cruise ship and you had to reprogram everyone's phone numbers into your phone," I admitted. "IT made it a lot easier to contact people after you'd done the hard work."

"Stealling from my efforts, are you? God, you're an awful friend," Kikyou huffed in mock exasperation, humour twinkling in her eyes. "So? Have they been useful?"

"Not in this case especially, but I do have someone who can help. Just study as usual, and I'll let you know if anything changes."

"So you'll take care of the Paper Swap? You won't need my help?" Kikyou asked, almost hopefully.

It was interesting to see how she reacted in certain situations. I had no doubt that she would be fully capable as a leader, but that exact situation had come up on the island. While Kikyou had performed admirably, she still suffered from living a lie, and being caught between her true desire, and having to pretend to be a good leader who made hash decisions.

Kikyou desperately wanted to avoid a leadership position, preferring to help from the sidelines, moving throughout the class and interacting with everyone. She was a friend, not a leader, and the chance to go through an exam without me needing her to do

much to help was a blessing to her ears.

"As long as you handle the bet."

A toothy grin grew on Kikyou's face.

"Oh, don't you worry about that. I'll come up with something to make sure she loses. That fucking bitch Horikita won't be around for much longer."

Jumping up, Kikyou stood straight and moved to stand in front of me.

"Are we going? I have an appointment soon, and I want to get changed before it."

"Before we do leave, I think we should deal with out eavesdropping guest," I suggested. Kikyou's face went pale at the words, instantly recognising the terrible situation she was in.

Intent on waiting, I simply turned to face the door, not speaking a word. Kikyou seemed too nervous, too worried to speak at all. And after a while, Hoshinomiya stuck her head out, a childish grin on her face.

"I was hoping you'd think you were mistaken, and I could sneak away," she said with a laugh.

"I don't make mistakes like that."

"No, I suppose you don't," she happily admitted, strolling out onto the roof, one hand in her pocket.

"What brings you here, Hoshinomiya-sensei?" Kikyou asked happily, having very quickly reasserted her self-control.

"Oh, nothing much. Just trying to sneak a peek at the newest couple, hehe." A childish giggle escaped her mouth, one that seemed almost perfectly real.

"I trust you'll keep this secret, won't you, sensei? After all, it's not good for teachers to go around spreading rumours," Kikyou nervously asked.

"Oooh, I know the rules, but this gossip is just too juicy. Do you really think I could let it go?" Hoshinomiya responded with a slight head tilt, finger poking her cheek in a cute thoughtful look. "No, you two are too cute to keep hidden."

And now a slightly predatory gleam came into Hoshinomiya's eyes.

I let out a slight sigh, realising how this confrontation would end.

"Your hand was in your pocket as you came out. Can I assume you had your phone there, recording what we said earlier whilst hiding?" I asked bluntly.

A dangerous smile grew on Hoshinomiya's face, when she realised that I understood the blackmail she had on the two of us. Even as a supposedly disinterested teacher, she would know of Kikyou's influence and reputation, and now had the capabilities to bring that

down.

"You assume correctly, Ayanokouji-kun. Always so quick and clever. I can't help but be reminded of me when I was in school."

Once again, Kikyou had paled, before an ugly look grew on her face. She opened her mouth to speak, but I held up a hand stopping her before she said anything worse. It wouldn't do to make this situation any worse.

"I'd like to congratulate you and your class on reaching Class A, so early in the year. An impressive feat, that no Class B has managed so quickly," I complimented. The first strategy in a negotiation was to put your opponent off-canter, before delivering a damaging blow.

And as expected, Hoshinomiya blinked for a second, confused at the unexpected compliment, and the moment I saw her mind reactivate, I continued.

"And to hold it even after that abysmal performance at the Sports Festival. I never would have expected Class A to come last out of every year in the school."

Anger flared in her eyes, for a brief moment, before the sweet smile returned to her face. Much like Kikyou, Hoshinomiya wore a façade in everyday life, one arguably better than my partners.

"Well, I am rather proud of my class for doing so well this year. It's all homeroom teachers dream to reach Class A, and not sink to the very bottom."

"It is tragic that Chabashira is stuck with such a defective bunch," I agreed. "She certainly deserves to be much higher, given her impressive talents."

"As for the Sports Festival," Hoshinomiya commented, completely ignoring my jab about my homeroom teacher, "every class has a bad day at some point. I'm sure you will experience this soon enough."

And I couldn't help but find it impressive how much malicious anger was forced into sweet and considerate warnings to her poor students.

"I'm sure we will. And do you envision yourself as the reason for our fall, with that recording on your phone?"

"Hmm." She pretended to consider it for a few moments. "No, that would be against the rules. After all, teachers are impartial, aren't they?"

"Completely. But I think only Machida follows that rule anyway," I admitted.

Hoshinomiya let out a cute laugh, but one that seemed dangerously close to being honest. "I have to agree with you there. After all, even cute little old me isn't innocent. I've done terrible things," she cackled, wiggling her fingers in faux intimidation.

Even so, I completely believed that she had. She wasn't the starting homeroom teacher of Class B for nothing.

"Are you trying to blackmail us, Hoshinomiya-sensei?" Kikyou asked with mock confusion. "I'm pretty sure that's against the rules."

"Of course it's against the rules, Kikyou-chan. But I'm not going to blackmail you. Why would I do that? But anonymous recordings appear all the time in this school. Perhaps it might show up in Class B. Who could tell?"

Kikyou let out a mock sigh of disappointment, shaking her head.

"You see, this isn't the first time something like this has happened to me, Hoshinomiya-sensei. And I've long since learnt my lesson." Reaching into her pocket, Kikyou also pulled out her phone. "Everything you've said since you came out has been recorded too."

And finally, the true Kikyou came out, a savage smirk growing on her face, satisfaction at having pulled one over her enemy.

"Don't play games you won't win, Hoshinomiya," I warned. "Your class is destined to lose. You cannot finish in Class A."

A twisted expression showed on the face of the teacher, a multitude of emotions ripping through her in seconds.

"You little brat. You have no idea what this school has in store for you." An awful smile stretched across Hoshinomiya's face. "You'll be gone by the end of the year. I've seen plenty of students like you, Ayanokouji-kun."

I stood my ground, unmoved by the venom in her voice. She seemed to be certain that I would fail, that it was impossible for me to single-handedly drag Class D to the top. And while it seemed unlikely, I had proved it was possible.

"You don't understand, do you," I realised. "You don't know the scope of what's happened."

Hoshinomiya's face froze in confusion, but it was the slow, bubbling laughter coming from Kikyou that drew our attention.

"She doesn't realise! The cunt doesn't realise how fucked her class is. Oh, this is amazing!"

"Your class is nothing, Hoshinomiya. Their grasp on Class A is purely because I allow it. It was by my actions that they were successful on the island. And it took one conversation to utterly destroy them in the Sports Festival."

It was an overexaggerating of events, but I could see this teacher was dangerously close to snapping. But we were already at a disadvantage. There was only one way to turn this situation even slightly in our favour, and that was to redirect Hoshinomiya's plans into a delayed action.

More time to deal with it was the best I could hope for here.

"You really are cocky, aren't you? But honestly, you're right

where you belong. Stuck with all of those other defectives."

"Huh? That's a really rude thing to say, Hoshinomiya-sensei!" Kikyou exclaimed, coming to my defence.

"Oh? I've seen the files your own teacher has on you, both of you. Even poor old Sae-chan has labelled you as defective, the most defective person in the class," Hoshinomiya managed to taunt without once dropping the cutesy act.

"No actually, I would wholeheartedly agree. I doubt there's anyone as defective as me in Class D" I admitted. Unsurprisingly, neither Kikyou nor Hoshinomiya looked very shocked at it.

"And you think as the lowest person in the school you can win?"

"I'm defective, not the lowest. There is a significant difference between the two."

Sighing, I let my bag slip off my shoulders and fall to the ground, before crouching in front of it and opening it up.

"I understand how this school works, Hoshinomiya, probably almost as well as you do," I began, while digging through my bag. "I know the rules, the boundaries, the lines, and how far you can push all three."

"And do you think that's enough?"

"Actually, yes." Standing up, I held the object of my search in my hand. "I'm not one for taking trophies, but I just couldn't resist when I saw this dashboard collectable." And, opening my hand, I presented to Hoshinomiya the small figurine that had been on the dashboard of her car.

Her eyes flared, recognising what it was and the meaning behind it instantly.

"You!"

"You can't touch us, Hoshinomiya. As a teacher, you're even more constricted to the rules than us."

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun. You remind me of Sae-chan, back when we were in school," she admitted with a laugh. "So confident. I bet you can't even imagine failing. But it won't be enough. You can't fight against the school."

"No. If I was forced to go against the entire school, I'd probably lose. But I do know that I have nothing to fear from you. Because as long as we have this recording, you can't do anything."

"Sit back and watch, Hoshinomiya-sensei," Kikyou taunted. "There isn't a class in our grade who has a chance against us. Enjoy watching them crumble."

I thought it was once again over the top, but Kikyou seemed to have picked up my idea, or was at least copying my actions and trusting in them.

Just then though, my phone buzzed with a notification, and

pulling it out I saw a message I had been expecting to get for the past few days.

"I wouldn't worry now though, Hoshinomiya. It seems you're in luck. Class A will be winning this exam, and you'll get to hold onto your position for a little while longer."

Hoshinomiya simply stared at me for a moment, before throwing her head back and laughing.

"The audacity you have is incredible, Ayanokouji-kun. To declare the outcome so early, I'm honestly impressed." She sighed, trailing off the humour. "Very well, then. You've made it clear enough that I can't do anything. But I'll be watching you, Ayanokouji-kun, as well as your little girlfriend. Slip up once, and you're done."

Finishing with that warning, Hoshinomiya gave us a beaming smile, before turning and bouncing away from the roof. Neither of us moved, listening to her footsteps as she walked away.

The moment that the sound of Hoshinomiya walking disappeared, Kikyou collapsed into me, arms and legs trembling slightly, face pale.

Quickly I wrapped my arms around her, holding her up so she didn't fall on the ground. There was panic dancing in Kikyou's eyes, and I could only imagine how similar this was to the night I first saw the real her.

"What are we going to do? She knows!"

I gave Kikyou a curious look.

"She probably always knew. I'm almost certain that what happened at your last school was in the teachers files."

A look of shock appeared on her face. "But—"

"Every teacher probably knows. They just haven't had a reason to act on it yet. I'm sure that just by talking about it Hoshinomiya violated some strict confidentiality clauses."

It was an important part of being a teacher that you understood and knew your students, to a deep level. It would help prevent any conflicts or problems that would arise. Most of that information though, would be confidential, and the teachers weren't supposed to talk to anyone about it, to prevent a situation exactly like this one.

"Right... there's no way this school didn't do background checks on everyone who got in. Honestly, it seemed strange at the time that they'd let me in if they knew, but now that we got put into the defective class it makes more sense."

Suddenly realising the compromising position, we were in, Kikyou let go of me, and gently pushed back until she was standing straight. Taking a deep breath, she ran her fingers through her hair, trying to calm down.

"Are you worried about this?" she finally asked me.

"No," I answered honestly. "You did well copying what I was doing. Hopefully that should narrow her options for a while."

Kikyou leaned back over the railing, and we watched as Hoshinomiya slowly walked across the grounds away from the school.

"I just couldn't believe she was like that. Is it really that big of a deal to be the teacher of Class A?"

I could have explained my deal with Chabashira, my underhand decisions and actions. I could have explained how the two teachers were friends once, and now rivals. I could have explained the benefits to the teacher of being in Class A. Instead, I gave a simple answer.

"It doesn't matter. I can handle whatever Hoshinomiya does."

A beaming smile returned to Kikyou's face, and all her worries seemed to disappear.

"Alright then. I'll just focus on dealing with Horikita." She turned around and walked to the door, stopping in the doorway to the entrace of the roof. "Why did you say that Class A would win? I thought Sakayanagi would crush whoever leads the broken remnants of Class A?"

"Normally, I would completely agree," I conceded. "Class B certainly has the edge in academia, and without a structure to Class A, they would struggle. But I just got a message from Amikura asking to meet. She's calling in my favour."

Authors Notes:

I spent so fucking long on this chapter. I could never get it right, and it's not even that long. I have no idea how to write Hoshinomiya and I spent ages going over the source material trying to find her voice and I still couldn't get it. It's so bloody frustrating.

This chapter was just awful. I've had an idea about how I would make this work for months, and this is the first time I've really struggled to get an idea down. It's so hard to transpose imagination into words, and it's so disheartening to see such an incredible thing I've imagined crumble into a disappointing chapter.

There is one more chapter in this arc that I've imagined before, and ever arc has one or two. It will take a while to work back up my confidence in writing, so chapters might come out a bit slower.

I apologies for the delay. I do my best to stick to a schedule for you all, trying to live up to expectations I've always had as a reader.

As always, hope you enjoyed!